



The Queer Tango Book

Ideas, Images and Inspiration in the 21st Century
Edited by Birthe Havmoeller, Ray Batchelor and Olaya Aramo

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Edited by Birthe Havmoeller, Ray Batchelor and Olaya Aramo

*In the memory of Ekatarina 'Kot' Khomenko
We dedicate this work to the dancers who came before us and
to those who will come after.*



Foreword and Contributors

The Queer Tango Book Project is created by Birthe Havmoeller and this publication is edited by Birthe Havmoeller, Ray Batchelor and Olaya Aramo.

Music and dancing are my favourite shortcuts to happiness. The Queer Tango Book is a labour of love coming from my curiosity, love of dancing tango and urge to explore Queer Tango as an alternative to the traditional Argentinian tango. *The Queer Tango Book* is created as a non-profit community project. The written and visual materials were collected via an open call in 2014. The anthology presents materials by social dancers, artists, scholars, teachers and performers. It is a celebration of the dance and the growth of the Queer Tango communities. The materials presented in this publication range from essays to a manifesto, a poem, interviews and artists' statements. The book also includes portfolios of unique artworks presenting contemporary Queer Tango imagery. The artworks are interspersed throughout the e-book.

I am tremendously grateful to all the book's contributors for sharing their insights and experiences of dancing either or both roles in tango with us. I am also happy that some of the authors contemplate the role of Queer Tango in the mainstream tango world and the contributions of the Queer Tango enthusiast/activist.

The Queer Tango Book would not have been possible without the generosity and support of all who have shared their stories, ideas and insights with us or in other ways have helped facilitate the production of this landmark publication. I thank Adriana Pegorer for encouraging me to go for it, realise my idea and create this book. My thanks and gratitude, also, to my co-editors, Ray Batchelor and Olaya Aramo and our proofreaders, Jo Bradford and Erika Lindsay, for their dedicated work making this book as good as it should be. Happy reading!
Abrazos

Birthe Havmoeller
Creator and co-editor / Queertangobook.org

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Contents

[Colophon and Copyright Statement](#)

[Foreword and Contributors](#)

Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Timing the tango](#)

Kristín Bjarnadóttir

[Luc and Bernd – A Photograph](#)

Marc Vanzwoll

[1. What is Queer Tango?](#)

[Tango Queer](#)

Mariana Docampo

[Queer Tango Dancers in Buenos Aires – Watercolours](#)

Susana Romero

[Queer Tango and The Ephemeral Abrazo](#)

Birthe Havmoeller

[Queer Tango Dancers – Portfolio](#)

Laura Valentino

[2. Dancing Differently](#)

[How Queer Tango Changed My Life](#)

Alex Gastel

[I followed from the first](#)

Paul Fairweather

[Tor and Hartmut – Drawing](#)

Susana Romero

[The Masochistas of Tango](#)

Carolina De Beus

[Straight Women in Queer Tango](#)

Sasha Cagen and Birthe Havmoeller (ed.)

[Tango Portraits – Photographs](#)

Carlos Blanco

[My Tale of Queer Tango: Near and Far from Buenos Aires](#)

Miguel Kanai

3. Rethinking the Dance

[How to Queer a Queer Tango: queer strategies for dual role dancers](#)

Birthe Havmoeller

[Troubling Effects of Leader/Follower Terminology](#)

Juliet McMains

[Tango Portrait – Photograph](#)

Soffia Silva

[Coming Out to Dance: or getting it straight – a re-examination of the relationship of Queer Tango to the tango mainstream](#)

Ray Batchelor

[Queer Tango in London – Portfolio](#)

Denise Lew

[Queer Tango and Milonguero Tango: a reflective essay](#)

Gigi Gamble

[Hilda Hisas: pastels and an artist statement](#)

Hilda Hisas

[Queer Canyengue Manifesto](#)

Olaya Aramo and Belén Castellanos

4. Performance

[Tango Con*Fusión turns 10](#)

Chelsea Eng

[Cristiano Bramani and Andrea Cesarini – Photographs](#)

Laura Valentino

[Interview with Claudio Gonzalez: the experiences and insights of a professional Queer Tango dancer](#)

Olaya Aramo

[Con Artist: paintings](#)

Con Artist

[A Glimpse Into The Life Of A Queer Tango Addict](#)

Con Artist

[Tango Fem Creating Gender Trouble in Rome](#)

Mila Morandi and Giulia Cerulli

5. Changing the World

Queer Tango as a form of struggling with patriarchal norms - notes on the Queer Tango in Russia

Natalia Merkulova

Queer Tango Dancers in Russia – Portfolio

Alice Heigh

Queer Tango as a Tool for Change: a case for the sharing of insights with others

Ray Batchelor

A Women's Tango Retreat - Breitenbush Hot Springs, Oregon, USA

Laurie Ann Greenberg

Laurie Ann Greenberg: artworks and artist statement

Laurie Ann Greenberg

Los Laureles: Queer Tango for Everyone in the Barrio de Barracas

Ray Batchelor and Olaya Aramo

Classes by Tango Libre at Los Laureles – Photograph

Edgardo Fernández Sesma

Biographies

Introduction

The Queer Tango Book is a labour of love. Our aim in creating it is to share ideas, insights and stories from those dancing Queer Tango around the world. It draws together writings and artworks which reflect on, document, critique and explore this rich and diverse phenomenon. Following a call for contributions by Birthe Havmoeller in Denmark, material was offered. Olaya Aramo in Spain and Ray Batchelor in England not only made submissions, but joined Birthe in the work of turning all the submissions into the anthology which follows. A small, dedicated regiment of copy-editors generously supported them in their work.

The Queer Tango Book cannot do everything! An historical overview of the history and pre-history of Queer Tango is beyond the scope of the present work; nor do we seek to define Queer Tango (although some of our contributors do), nor is the book based on formal academic research. Instead *The Queer Tango Book* has been conceived of and created as a community project, emerging from a global community, with materials collected via an open call. Like the Queer Tango community itself, our approach throughout has been inclusive. Readers will notice that there are far more contributions from women than from men. This has not been a matter of editorial policy but simply a function of the profile of the group of individuals who offered work to be included, which in turn almost certainly reflects the fact that more women are active in Queer Tango than men.

We present a vivid sense of the diversity of the phenomenon that is Queer Tango. Included are personal experiences, opinion pieces, reflective writings, polemics, manifestos and a body of original artworks from dancers, scholars, academics, performers and artists. The contributions come from many different perspectives and from people in many different countries. They range from insights from those who are just getting started to the views of well-known figures in the Queer Tango community. There is something for everyone and many things for most.

We want to illuminate the richness, complexity and sometimes the contradictions of Queer Tango, showing what has emerged since it came into being in 2000 and what Queer Tango is like now; and we want to make material freely available to stimulate debate, a debate which we hope will inform how Queer Tango develops in the future and, above all, how it is danced. This is an open-ended anthology gathered in 2014, edited and published in 2015. We are giving *The Queer Tango Book* away as an e-book for free. We want the world to know more about it.

There have always been dancers who have danced the other or both roles in tango, but the term 'Queer Tango' scarcely existed before the turn of the century. It was coined by Ute Walter, Marga Nagel and Felix Volker Feyerabend for the first International Queer Tango Festival in Hamburg, Germany. In 2011, just prior to the 10th anniversary of the International Queer Tango Festival in Hamburg, Ute Walter said that that the term 'Queer Tango' has allowed for a new idea to be established, a freer tango which is not obliged to represent masculine/feminine relations or predetermined gender differences, which in the mainstream are seen as a given fact, and which reduces people's possibility to 'communicate' as they please in Tango.

Social tango danced by same gender couples has often been denigrated, suppressed or robbed of its specificity and roots in the efforts of some to perpetuate the attractive, men only, tango Origin Myth: that the Argentinian tango was invented by male dancers in the late 19th century in Buenos Aires and Montevideo. At the end of the 1980s, when the

Second Wave of Argentinian Tango came to Europe and the US, the revival of the tradition of social tango being danced by male couples and female couples re-emerged. Teachers sympathetic to feminism or to the gay and lesbian movement or to the queer movements started teaching Argentinian tango classes for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and queer (LGBTQ) people and their non-LGBTQ allies.

The Queer Tango Book aims to remedy the effects of an old but still active homophobic project of exclusion and denial by presenting Queer Tango in multiple contexts. Doing so yields new insights into the nature of the dance itself. The book also aims to increase people's understanding of the Queer Tango communities and the 'queer sensibilities' which are now emerging as 'out and proud' social dancing in the 21st century.

The precise meaning of 'Tango' can be argued over; however, the meaning of 'Queer' is still more problematic and causes confusion. 'Queer' means odd, different and unnatural. It has previously been used to insult LGBT people. The academic term 'queer' emerged in the 1990s out of the fields of women studies, gay and lesbian studies and gender studies. The philosophy of the 'queer theory' is attributed to American gender theorist Judith Butler. It describes gender and sexual identity as something which is performed through obsessively repeated actions and thus perceived as a "constant" - he is a man, she is a woman - when actually it is a phenomenon that is being produced all the time and reproduced all the time. Judith Butler's claim is that nobody is a 'gender' from the beginning. This philosophy raised awareness in general and made people see 'queer' in a different light. The previously derogative term became a popular catch-all for the 'other', i.e. gays and lesbians, and sparked the creation of a new queer subculture. Confusion persists because, in different contexts, all these meanings of the word 'queer' also persist.

Many queers see sexual identity as variable and fluid. To them identifying as 'queer' is a political statement about being non-heteronormative or about questioning mainstream heteronormativity; as such it is not related to their sexual orientation or preferences. Thus 'queer' can be a political statement, a lived reality, an artistic/cultural practice informed by the life of the artist/dancer. When it is used as an adjective in phrases such as 'Queer Tango' it normally indicates that the quality of being 'fluid' is ascribed to the dance(rs), as the roles in Queer Tango are not necessarily gendered (or sexualised in any specific way). Queer Tango dancers and event organisers challenge the tango tradition of dividing the dancers into two groups by virtue of their gender. They offer a new 'world view'. In a world where bonding and dancing with a person of your own gender are still taboo in many cultures they are creating safe and non-judgemental spaces welcoming all people regardless of gender, gender expressions and preference(s) who want to explore both roles or the 'other' role.

Today, there are Queer Tango events held on a regular basis in: Hamburg, Berlin, Köln, Frankfurt, Munich, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Göteborg, Oslo, The Hague, Paris, Zürich, Rome, Naples, Milan, Casalgrande, Vicenza, Madrid, Barcelona, London, St Petersburg, Moscow, Istanbul, New York, Boston, Miami, Chicago, The Bay Area in California, Seattle, Montreal, Mexico City and Buenos Aires. Austin in Texas and Oldenburg in Germany have recently joined them. Recovering our cultural heritage and cultural spaces as dancers is a crucially important endeavour for everyone, but especially for lesbians, gay men, queers, feminists and others who live in societies in which their sexual identities have been ignored, concealed and condemned. In some of these places, it is still being criminalised.

Queer Tango may still be taboo at some milongas, but at least today in many countries it is seen as a real cultural possibility.

The sense of community and standing together are integral parts of what attracts many dancers to the Queer Tango communities and festivals. When 200+ dancers from all over the world meet at the Gala Night of the International QueerTango-Festival in Berlin, Kreuzberg, the community spirit is overwhelming to most first-time visitors. Being with others who identify as you do is important to most Queer Tango enthusiasts. Strength and unity not only in a visual and visible sense, but also in an emotional one: the kick of joy that you get from being together with like-minded people, who inspire your curiosity and make you do cool things on the dance floor. This is a way in which you derive new senses of power and joy, as it allows you to counter the “being different” experience in a positive way: you are blending in rather than standing out when you practice dancing the ‘other’ role and dance at a milonga, where you are setting the agenda (!).

Queer tango dancers are now taking “our dance” into mainstream culture, as they resist being divorced from mainstream tango. We are happy to see the popularity of Queer Tango rise, when, for example, professional tango teachers perform Queer Tango, exchanging roles and dancing *intercambio* with their colleagues at mainstream tango festivals. We hope this book will inspire people around the world to dance Queer Tango. The official website of *The Queer Tango Book* - www.queertangobook.org - offers resources about Queer Tango. It features a blog which is a video archive with samples of Queer Tango performances by professional dancers and by social dancers and publishes a Queer Tango newsletter.

Queer Tango offers a welcoming environment open to all kinds of dancers. Straight or queer - if you dance the ‘other’ role in tango or experiment with both roles, you make our hearts sing!

Notes

1 <http://nuevasmilongueras.files.wordpress.com/2012/01/greetings1.pdf>

2 <https://youtu.be/Bo7o2LYATDc>

Prologue

Timing the tango

© Kristín Bjarnadóttir

I step into land of
no tomorrows
with skyline
of endless now
where yesterdays only exist
as an aching body
or a stolen heart

How yellow is the colour
of tango
How green how light
how heavy blue or red
Does it matter?
How much of a rainbow
grey or gay straight or trans

Trust is what matters
while rounding movements
Kindling embraces and queering roles
Minding consciousness

being aware
of fellow couples travelling
into moments of Sameness
into music making you
one step closer
to the land of longing
loneliness Still

We are circling the rounds
embracing the sun
while caring
Listening ...
My spine matters
my energy matters my
inner pictures

our excitement our calmness our dreams
How much of a choreography?
Tango does not care
tango is the invisible space
between us making photos
of togetherness
The tango is making me up

right now

Luc and Bernd – A Photograph
© Marc Vanzwoll



Luc and Bernd. © Marc Vanzwoll, 2014

1. What is Queer Tango?

Tango Queer

© Mariana Docampo, 2005

Background: the statement (below) was written in Spanish in 2005 with the purpose of establishing the conceptual basis for what Mariana Docampo was creating: Tango Queer de Buenos Aires. The editors have assisted in revising the English version and Mariana Docampo has approved this new English version of the statement. Up until 2005, the only venues that existed in Buenos Aires were the milonga La Marshall, some isolated classes and practicas for the LGBT public (primarily male), and tango classes for women taught by Mariana Docampo in the Casa del Encuentro (the "Meeting House", a lesbian feminist bar), plus the monthly Milonga de Señoritas, held in the same place. These were the immediate antecedents of the Tango Queer space; and it was there that they began to discuss the first ideas that then led to its creation. The term 'queer' was rarely used in the LGBT community at the time, and was completely unknown in the greater tango community of Buenos Aires.

Mariana Docampo is currently [2015] running Tango Queer Milonga de Buenos Aires.

1. CONCEPT

1.1. What is Tango Queer?

Tango Queer is a tango environment open to everyone. It is a meeting point to socialise, exchange, learn and practice, where the aim is to explore different kinds of communication between dancers of Tango as a different way of communication.

In Tango Queer nobody takes your sexual orientation for granted, nor your choice of role.

1.2. Why was Tango Queer started and what does it propose?

Many people felt the need to create a "liberated" tango environment, where the rules and codes of traditional tango are not taken into account and are not there to restrain communication between people.

Our proposal is that Tango should be danced without pre-established roles attached to the gender of the dancers. From that point onwards there are new possibilities for dancing.

2. QUEER

2.1. Meaning

The term 'queer' literally means 'odd', 'weird', 'eccentric', 'outlandish' and 'suspicious'. It was first used to name the gay, lesbian, transsexual and intersexual gay community in a pejorative way.

The queer movement first appeared in the beginnings of the 90s within the gay and lesbian community in the United States. Some people decided to call themselves by this deprecatory term and thus give the word a new meaning. This was done in order to be different from those that looked for a uniform identity (normalisation) for 'gays and lesbians' (a term which deliberately created a positive image for the gay male: a professional, Caucasian gay male).

Queer characterises itself by not asking or claiming something, but just grabbing it. It does not negotiate, but acts. Queer is a confrontational movement, disobedient, subversive towards conservative institutions. It seeks to create a liberated environment where sensibility can be developed, a space in which people can express themselves the way they truly feel and thus overcome the shame projected onto them by reversing the social order.

2.2. Queer Studies

Queer is usually associated with action and cultural and political activism. However, it was able to make its way into the academy through the development of queer theory which proposed a new way of understanding gender, sexuality, sexual orientation and gender identity.

Queer theorists argue that identity is always composed of an infinite number of elements, such as: sexual orientation, class, gender, nationality, age, race, etc. All identities are unstable, arbitrary and exclusionary constructions. By means of exclusion, identities are formed as the result of power relations, with a centre and a periphery.

The main aim of queer theory is to accomplish a multidisciplinary approach to social submission and control devices.

2.3. Why 'Tango Queer'?

Because...

- i) Using the word 'queer' to define ourselves involves taking over the term and giving it a new meaning and so neutralises its pejorative connotations. This implies the subversion of a structure.
- ii) Since the term includes anything that is not standard, it includes everyone, without setting anyone under a static order, but grounding their coexistence in diversity.
- iii) The social roles of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered people are questioned because of their sensual/erotic dynamics. This actually helps to open up the possibility of exploring through dance new ways of communication.
- iv) 'Queer' people dancing tango in the way *they* feel it takes this chauvinistic emblem which excludes diversity from the structure of the dance itself over and promotes new power relationships between genders. Taking over offers the possibility of having different dynamics for each of the dancers, promoting communication as equals.

3. TANGO

3.1. Feelings

Tango itself as a dance is not only music and movement. Tango has to do with communication between two persons. It is a language established between two bodies in which sensuality flows. For the few minutes which a song lasts strong emotions are conveyed between the dancers. That is why tango is related to feelings, senses and the way we express what we feel.

However, in its contemporary form Tango *became* a dance for export as an Argentinian symbol.

3.2. Tango as a symbol

3.2.1. Heterosexism

Only if something has symbolic representation can it “exist”. Only then can it be recognised by society.

Tango is a popular dance and, like any other, it works as a mirror for the society from which it emerges and in which it is developed, in this case the society of Buenos Aires. But Tango is also a dance that has a strong sensual connotation. Hence this mirror reflects nothing but the way our society sees eroticism between its members. In the first place: man-woman; then, active-passive; two well-defined, distinct sets of roles. Such binary oppositions simplify the complex erotic bonds that exist between individuals. Although it is a model which represents a considerable majority in our society, it establishes an “allowed” way of feeling that conditions and censors many other different ways of feeling. This is prescribed as the model, and all those who feel differently are left outside of this model.

Such social representation we could symbolically think of as an “Erotic Feeling Formula”. According to this formula, lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgendered people are not represented, nor straight men and women who conceive of eroticism in a different way from the one this formula prescribes.

However, our society is changing, and Tango continues faithfully to mirror our society, changing along with it. Its scene, its dancing, its people. It is this possibility of change that opens the doors to Queer Tango.

3.2.2. Women

That tango is a macho dance is something that few would dispute. Without going any further, it is firstly evidenced in how the roles are designated: man leads, woman follows.

And although (in the best of cases) it is true that these roles are meant to be complementary, there is a notable inequality in how the roles are related to one another. The position one person occupies over the other is asymmetric, chiefly when the role is “naturally” ascribed according to gender, and does not allow the exchanging of roles as an option.

Such inequality is strictly related to the difference of knowledge. While the male leader is the one who carries most of the information in relation to steps and movements, the female follower is taught from the beginning to allow herself to be led. The pleasure of the dance increases in direct proportion to the extent to which the woman presents less and less resistance and the man becomes more confident. (It is even interesting to note that most of the “liberties” that women take, when dancing, are called “ornaments”.)

As a result of this dynamic, a woman without a leading man cannot take a single step. She becomes dependent on the man for her movements.

This sort of relationship is far more evident in the traditional styles such as the 'Milonguero' style. In the new tango styles women have begun to participate more and their active cooperation has even become necessary. Still, the symbolic burden of control which the roles bear is the same, and they are defined according to gender.

What we question is not the existence of roles, which is the primary basis of the structure of tango, but the way they are set and identified with gender, as if one thing was strictly related to the other.

Women are usually not willing to lead or suggest a different role for themselves within tango. This might be out of contentment or perhaps out of fear of upsetting the man. Nevertheless, within the last few years many women have appeared dancing with other women at milongas. They do this either because they want to, or as a first step to strengthen their understanding of the covert knowledge, kept a secret for so long.

3.2.3. Lesbians

One of the biggest struggles for lesbians was and still is the struggle to be visible; that is to say, for lesbians to be socially recognised.

Lesbians have been erased from history and, accustomed to silence or to disguising their love and eroticism, perhaps have made silence their way of life.

We have already noted, for example, how roles in Tango are designated, to which we have given the name "Erotic Feeling Formula": man-leader and woman-follower.

We have already discussed symbolism in the designation of the roles and also the dependence that the woman-follower has on the man-leader.

As a result of this formula, a woman who chooses another woman as her dance partner will face a large obstacle: neither of them can lead. Therefore (symbolically speaking) it would be impossible for them to dance tango with one another. However, this does not happen when a couple of men try to dance tango together, for they both play an active role.

The absence of symbolic representation in such an idiosyncratic dance like Tango demonstrates this social invisibility. As a result, for an anthropocentric society like ours, lesbianism is something that cannot be conceived of.

That is why we see the woman-woman formula (the impossible formula in tango) as the most subversive one.

In order to bring about this impossible formula, it is necessary that at least one of the women can lead, so taking up a different role; or that both of them take on both roles indistinctly, allowing the possibility of exchanging roles.

This not only questions the structural sexism of the dance, but also admits the exploration of Tango through an exchange in which difference does not imply power inequality, but a new way of communication.

3.3. Tango History

3.3.1. Marginality

All official stories agree that when Tango was born it was a marginal dance. It would be danced in the suburbs where the lower classes (thugs, *compadritos* and prostitutes) mixed with "rich boys", and together they began forging the first moves and exploring the eroticism of the dance.

Tango was frowned upon and considered immoral and obscene because of its high erotic content. And, at the time, it was persecuted with censorship and prohibition. So there are three elements that cannot be left out when talking about Tango History: eroticism, marginality and censorship. Involved with these elements there are power issues of class, gender and nationality. (Let's not forget the dynamic of *dinámica de deslumbramiento*[1] still existing between Argentinians and foreigners in the Universe of Tango, which started after the "Triumph in Paris".)

All these elements are not only linked with the origins of Tango as a cultural phenomenon, but also related to the deep structure of the dance. The attempt to blend, aestheticise and "normalise" the ways of dancing and the environment where Tango dancing takes place is a further element in the dynamics of Tango, yet, in spite of all of this, there is a fight for new approaches, approaches which match the cultural and social changes of the dancers.

3.3.2. Roles

There are many studies which show that Tango was originally danced among men. Regardless of the explanation for this, it shows an interesting element: the fact that in the beginning Tango was performed as a practice which is abstract from the gender roles which are assigned socially. Possibilities could then be varied.

4. DANCE TECHNIQUE

4.1. Role exchange

Queer Tango opens up the possibility for the people who dance tango freely to choose the role they want to take up and what gender they prefer to dance with. To enable people to dance in this way, dancers are taught to exchange roles. This means everyone learns to lead and to follow. Dancers can choose either role when dancing or to exchange roles, depending on the person they are dancing with and the moment they decide to do so. This technique allows the dynamics to be explored in a more equal relationship. Here, the symbolic power, formerly ascribed to the leading role, vanishes when both people can take up either role.

5. INTERNATIONAL NETWORK

5.1. Feedback

We know that, for an idea to flourish, both a flow of people and an exchange of ideas are necessary. The idea is to create a communication network between people in different countries who are working with the same outlook.

5.2. Background

Feminism and queer studies have begun their theoretical and political activism in other countries. This is inspiring and motivating our actions in Argentina.

With regards to Queer Tango we can mention two historical facts which serve as the foundations for our actions:

- i) The International Queer Tango Festival in Hamburg which has been organised every year since 2000 in Germany. Its founders were the first to use the term 'Queer Tango'.
- ii) In her book, *Tango y Género* (Tango and Gender) [ABRAZOS, 2004], Magali Saikin suggests evaluating Argentinean tango from a gender perspective and establishes the first

conclusions ever made about the gender tensions that exist in tango, understanding tango as a cultural phenomenon.

6. ACTIVITIES

6.1. Tango classes

Queer Tango classes are open to anyone, regardless of sexual orientation, race, social class or nationality. The idea is freely to find a dance partner and choose the role you want to learn. Both roles – leading and following – are taught in our classes from the first steps. This methodology allows new ways of exploring the possibilities within the dance.

6.2. Milonga

Milonga Tango Queer is open to anyone regardless of sexual identity, race, social class or nationality. It is a meeting point, a space in which to socialise and exchange ideas, where everyone can freely choose their dance partners and the role they want to dance.

6.3. Promoting artistic expressions related to Queer Tango: photography, paintings, drawings, sculptures, comics, caricatures, movies, theatre and *fileteado* graphic art

The fact that we do not have many artistic expressions showing Tango between women and between men or the appearance of transvestites in Tango proves the historical suppression of such practices or the silenced circumstances in which they might have occurred.

Knowing the importance of art's symbolic function in society, we promote the production and sharing of artistic productions related to the theme of diversity within Tango.

6.4. Promoting debate and exchange of information about queer themes and tango

Queer Tango reconsiders Tango as a way of viewing the organisation of relationships between genders in society and, when considering the symbolic characteristics of the structure of the dance itself, acknowledges the tensions generated between people because of class, gender, nationality, and so on. Tango is to be understood as a cultural phenomenon that reflects the society in which it is danced.

The fact that Queer Tango actually takes place questions the very foundation of the existing social system and provides opportunities for new readings.

That is why we would like to invite you to create and share theoretical materials related to the theme of diversity within Tango.

Notes

TANGO QUEER por Mariana Docampo, 2005, published at the Tango Queer website in 2009 - <http://buenosairestangoqueer.blogspot.dk/2009/04/que-es-tango-queer.html>

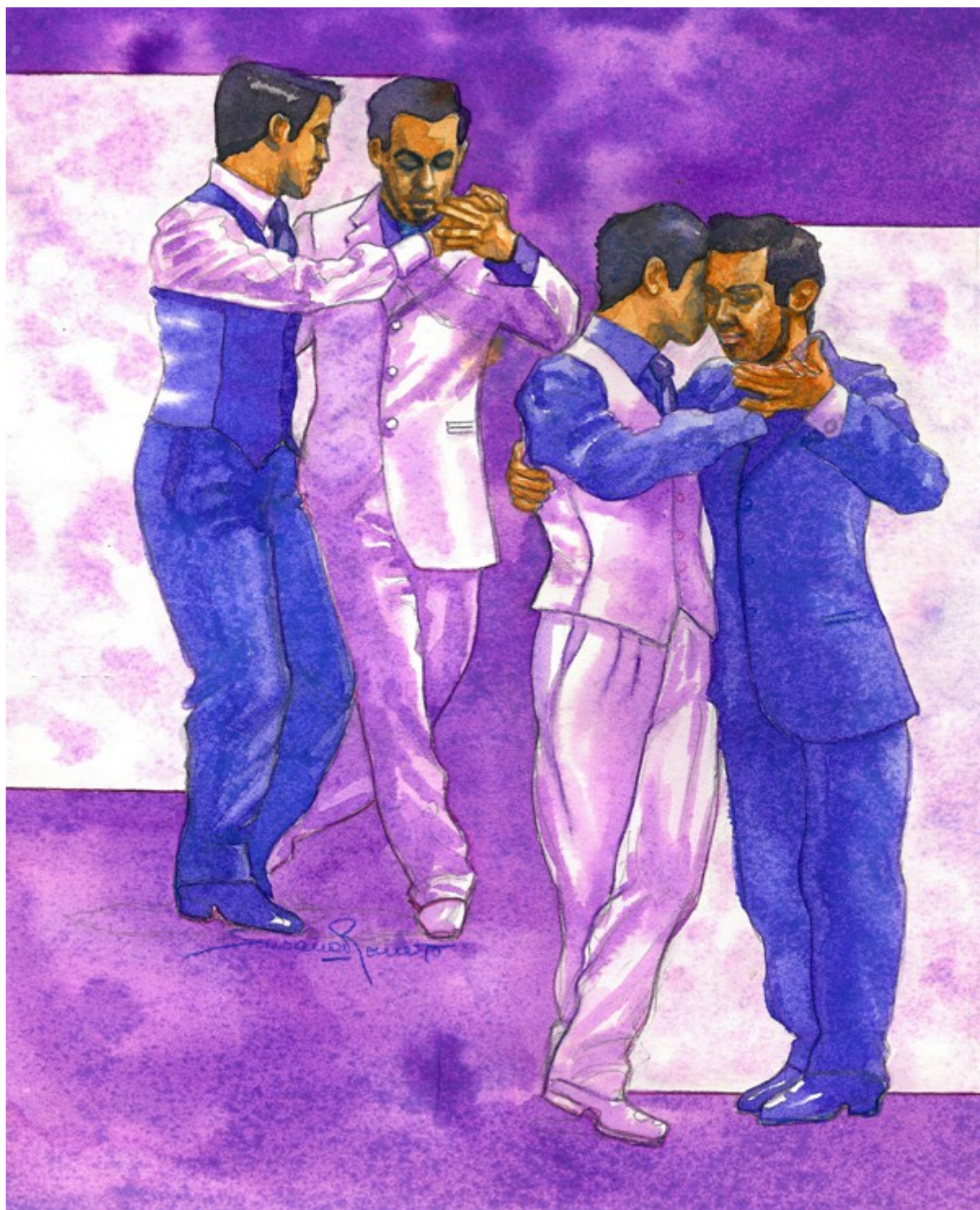
Tango y Género - Identidades y roles sexuales en el Tango Argentino by Magali Saikin, ABRAZOS 2004. ISBN-13: 978-3980738385

Milonga Tango Queer - <http://www.tangoqueer.com>

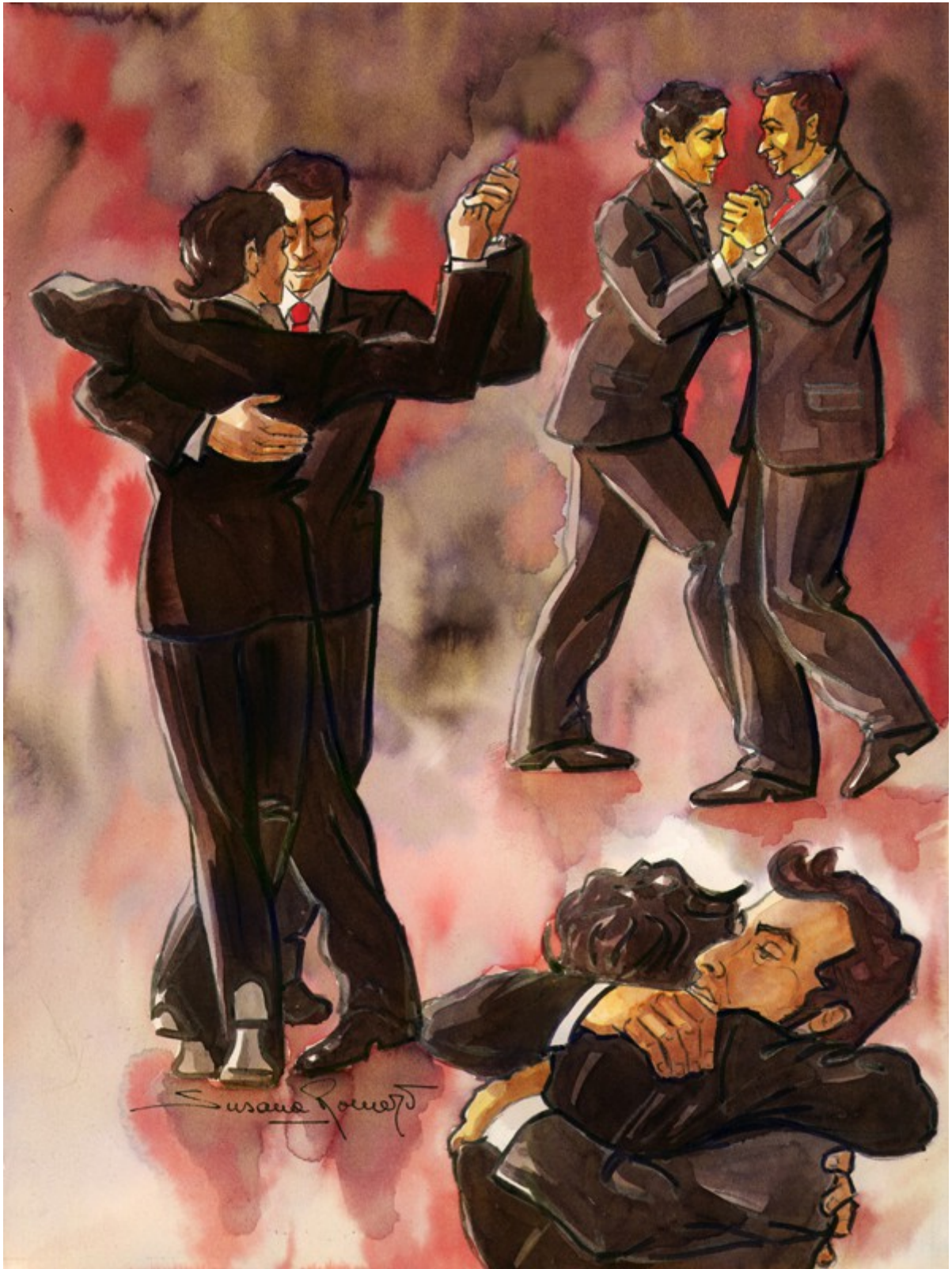
Queer Tango Dancers in Buenos Aires – Watercolours
© Susana Romero



Soledad y Yuyú. © Susana Romero



Elos, los primeros. © Susana Romero



Concurso. © Susana Romero



Felice 10 años La Marshall. © Susana Romero

Queer Tango and The Ephemeral Abrazo

© Birthe Havmoeller

When I took up dancing tango in 2009 other dancers asked me, 'Why do you want to lead?' Now in 2014, as they can see that I more or less know what I am doing on the dance floor, the questions are less frequent. The 'why?' puzzled me a bit. What kind of answers were they expecting from me - the ambitious, the straight, or the queer one? I was just dancing the way that comes most naturally to me, but as it happened hardly any of the other tango dancers were dancing both roles at my local milonga, and I found myself invading one of the modern dance culture's heterosexual strongholds. Their questions made me question my reasons for leading, but it didn't make me stop doing what I was doing, that is, DANCING with people regardless of their gender, switching between dancing as a leader and dancing as a follower as often as needed. Their way of dancing tango isn't the only way.

Soon I was introduced to the concept of 'Queer Tango', which is, in my view, the latest in a long series of tango styles. In Queer Tango, I had found a mindset which enabled me to reflect on and contemplate my own practice.

Queer Tango - A New Dance Style

Describing a dance style which is constantly evolving, is complicated. In the following I'll share some of my thoughts and observations with you.

Queer Tango is often described as Tango Argentino danced with 'open roles' or 'reversed roles'. In this context 'queer' is a re-appropriation of the academic concept of 'queer theory', a philosophical term first coined in 1990 by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Adrienne Rich and Diana Fuss.

In 2001 Ute Walter, Marga Nagel and Felix Volker Feyerabend gave the practice of dancing both roles in tango the name 'Queer Tango' at the 1st International Queer Tango Festival in Hamburg, Germany. The concept of 'queer' takes Queer Tango into the realm of 'the other', the non-mainstream. It deconstructs the traditional (heteronormative gender) role play and division of labour of the Argentinian tango, where the man leads and the woman follows, by suggesting that both dancers may learn to dance both roles. However, learning both roles does not necessarily mean that a dancer will dance both roles at a public milonga. Most dancers dancing both roles in tango tend to prefer one more than the other.

Couples who practice some kind of shared leadership when dancing tango, vals and milonga are in my opinion dancing Queer Tango. The practice of shared leadership in tango opens up novel creative processes, increases the sharing of musicality and offers a different division of labour within the couple.

At Queer Tango events, couples often share the leadership of their dance by taking turns when leading. One dancer leads the first two tangos of a tanda and gives the lead to the other dancer who'll lead the last two. At these events you may also see dancers brilliantly exchanging roles as they dance *intercambio*, turning the lead into a flowing energy where one can not tell who is leading and who is following. To me, it looks as if these dancers refrain from fully taking on one specific role in order to co-create their dances, and they 'queer' their tangos by embodying the (gender) roles of tango as a fluid practice.

Abrazo - The Ephemeral Embrace

A dancer once told me with a smile, “There is nowhere you can get as many hugs as in the tango community!”

Escaping the frantic outer world into the microcosm of the milonga, all tango dancers are dying to be embraced, and the embrace is just what tango gives us. Forming the traditional A-frame of the classical tango milonguero, our bodies meet at the upper part of the torso in the *abrazo* (the sustained close embrace). The tango leader leads by leaning forward, pushing ever so gently at the heart of the follower. The follower receives the lead by accepting their shared axis.

Having accepted your *cabeceo* (nonverbal invitation to dance), a tango dancer will attempt to be ‘the love of your life’ during your dance. The aesthetics of tango both simulates and stipulates a loving relationship between the two people. The dancers are in love, not with each other, but with dancing Tango. The gentle abrazo sparks feelings of love, joy and tenderness. Like bubbles in a glass of champagne the emotions flow in your body, as you adjust the embrace and start to dance, and when the music stops, it is all over. What the untrained eye sees as a couple in love is in fact the well-designed sensual movement of Argentinian tango, which is made possible by a good measure of love, empathy, and dedicated attention. These things come naturally to all experienced tango dancers, as they embrace and connect with a casual dance partner, a close friend or a complete stranger. The tender embrace is as ephemeral as a rainbow after it has stopped raining; it only leaves a faint impression on your heart, before it evaporates as the music stops, we smile, hug, and go our separate ways to share the next tanda with another dance partner.

Argentinian tango communication is non-verbal. It may look as sensual as a kiss, but for the tango dancer’s flirtatious *mirada* (glance) and *cabeceo* (invitation to dance by eye contact) never read, ‘Give us a kiss!’ It just says, ‘Give us a dance!’ The follower accepts the invitation to dance with a subtle nod - or says, ‘No thank you’ by looking away, and thus cutting off the flirtatious eye contact. Western people, who are out of their element, when it comes and adopting the Argentinian tradition of *mirada and cabeceo* and flirting the Argentinian way, often resort to the formal verbal invitation to dance: “Would you like to dance?” A question, which by nature is less flirtatious than a *cabeceo*, and consequently they miss the first part of the tango couple’s subtle nonverbal conversation, the ‘foreplay’ of their co-created tango.

Female Wisdom: The First Mystery

A milonguera revealed the esoteric mystery of Argentinian tango to me, “If you have control of the lower part of the torso i.e. hara and root chakra, the dance will open your heart chakra and change your life.”

The perfect control of your posture, axis, and body language is an inherent part of excellent tango technique. Many dancers suggest that we have better dances, when we can put aside our desires and concentrate on the flow of the dance. The concentration and connection needed in order to dance well are of a different nature to a sexual energy... However, we are all flirting with each other in order to get our dances and embraces.

At the milonga we all love to look at the dancers' sensual tango moves and in return we accept the gaze of the spectators, when we are on the dance floor. The milonga experience is about turning the dance, the gentle abrazo, along with the music, and the lyrics of a tango song into a romantic embodiment of togetherness, flow, and sensual,

almost meditative tango co-improvisations. And the more it changes our lives, the more joyful the experience! This dance is all-consuming.

Time and again we recreate the sensuality of the Argentinian tango traditions, when 'we dance tango in between each other's legs', as an Argentinian dancer once described one of the provocative aspects of the tango; so, too, as we dance a tango milonguero, cheek to cheek. The tango has maintained its sensuality and attraction for more than a century, and tango instructors teach that absolute emotional and physical connection between the dancers is essential for a good dance experience. Access to the sensual non-verbal experience of the dance, and the abrazo are a must at the milonga, and the dancers will wait until after their tanda to try to find out if their physical attraction or couple 'chemistry' might transform itself into an intellectual and/or emotional attraction as well, - that is, if this is where they want to take their conversation.

Female Wisdom: The Second Mystery

Modern science has discovered that the music and dancing releases endorphins (joy hormones) in our bodies, and there is a subtle correlation between the dancers and the spectators through which joy is transmitted to everybody present at a milonga. On a physical level, yet subconscious to most of us, we all share love and other deep emotions with each other at the milonga, and the magical moment according to the wise milonguera is, when all leaders pay attention to each other and the couples on the dance floor start dancing together, as this will make the individual couple's little bubble of Tango Love become a part of a deeper and higher expression of shared harmony.

Tango Roles - Role Play in Tango

Professional dancers and tango instructors know how to dance both roles and at tango workshops they encourage their students to do so, but when performing or teaching the majority of them seem not to be interested in dancing tango with open roles or reversed roles in public. They adhere to the strictly heteronormative role play of the tango world, and they pass on characteristics of this mindset to their students by virtue of being role models.

Dancers who pursue the creative path of dancing practicing both roles in tango often attend Queer Tango events. The term 'queer' as in 'queer milonga' is a term commonly used as a synonym for the LGBTQ community, referring to dancers whom we assume to be not-necessarily-straight-and-quite-possibly-lesbian, -gay, -bi-, -transsexual, -questioning, -intersex, -queer-identified people as well as to the dance style itself. However, being 'queer' is usually defined by the young generation of queer people as a political identity, and with it comes a deep wish not to be defined by sexual stereotypes.

Many people will tell you that they don't like being labelled by virtue of their sexual preferences. Queer people probably want to be accepted by others firstly, as people, like everyone else, and dream that sexuality and all the shyness, taboo, and bias which sometimes are prompted by sexual orientation are not what will constitute your first impression of them. They do not want to be one of 'the others', marginalised by their choice of soulmate or dance partner. The term 'queer' is potentially liberating, as it blurs

the boundaries between the sexual categories by asserting that gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation are fluid practices.

Tango Is So Hot And Sexy!

There are no 'neutral' spaces in the realm of tango - especially not at a Queer Tango event. All dancers are flirting to get their tangos and hugs, but here the role play is different: women cabeceo women, men cabeceo men, and friends dance together as mixed couples. The unspoken social code of the queer milonga reads: do not assume anything about the sexual preferences of the other dancers.

However subtle your (queer) cabeceos are, a person who is actively blurring/queering the gender boundaries at a mainstream milonga by dancing Queer Tango is bound to stand out (as queer), as only few straight people pursue the dancing of both roles at mainstream milongas. 'Coming out' as a dancer who dances both roles (regardless of your gender and sexual preferences) may make people wonder why you are dancing the other role, or why you are flirting with someone of your own gender? Considering the heteronormative mindset of the tango world, I find that it is important to take the topic of taboo into consideration when discussing Queer Tango or tango with open roles. The negative attitude towards homosexuality, which is increasing in many countries around the world, makes me doubt that any lgbtq person may state that his or her life has not been affected by discrimination, internalised bias, and self-censorship. My personal experience is that it may take years fully to learn to embrace one's *otherness* and the *otherness*, which one sees in other people. Dancing Queer Tango may potentially make you very conscious about your sexual orientation and preferences, as you will be dancing with partners of various genders.

The subtle homophobia of the tango communities – or looking at the other side of the coin: the sexual preferences, which are the key to many people's choice of tango partners and their engagement in the tango role play are something which we all assume to be happening, but we just don't talk much about it..., thus the emotional 'problems' remain unresolved.

Queer Tango - A New Tango Philosophy

My experience is that dancing Queer Tango, focusing on the shared lead, increases the level of connection and alertness required for you to take in the subtle details of your dance partner's body language for both the leader and the follower, or you'll miss the subtle moves and invitations coming from your dance partner.

I see open-minded tango teachers teaching their (predominantly straight) students how the tango leaders in their dances now and then may let go of the lead and let the followers be free to improvise as they please. And tango teachers, who have taken up teaching Queer Tango or tango with open roles teach how to exchange roles gracefully or how to lead from the position of the follower as strategies for dancers, who pursue dancing both roles. They explore the numerous ways to 'queer' a tango, creating a new queer tango philosophy along the way.

The benefits of learning Queer Tango include a higher level of awareness and acceptance of your Queer Tango dance partners as diverse, strong dancers; and learning to dance the

other role will make you a better dancer, even if you decide only to specialise in one of the roles. Taking up dancing Queer Tango on a regular basis will open your eyes and heart to wonderfully creative people. Brave dancers, who are willing to share their musicality and creativity with you, when you let go, share the leader- or followership of the dance and start co-creating with them. This is the amazing gift which the creators of the concept of Queer Tango are trying to make all of us see, cherish and love.

Queer Tango Dancers – Portfolio

© Laura Valentino

Photographer Laura Valentino has photographed Queer Tango dancers, documenting the dancers and the milongas of different Queer Tango festivals in Northern Europe among others The International Queer Tango Festival in Stockholm organized by Charlotte Rivero, Tangoverkstan – Roles in Motion and the International QueerTango-Festival in Berlin organised by Astrid Weiske.



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2. Dancing Differently

How Queer Tango Changed My Life

© Alex Gastel

Tango is more than a dance. It's a lifestyle, a philosophy and a state of mind. Tango literally changed my whole life - or, to be precise, one form of the dance did so. It all started when I visited a Queer Tango workshop...

I am a Traveler

In 2012, at their milonga venue, Tango Ocho organized the first Queer Tango Festival in Stuttgart. It was my first queer milonga ever, and the first queer workshops I'd attended. The whole festival just blew my mind: equality was suddenly a possibility in this dance.

At the milonga I felt like I had been trapped for a long time, and was now freed for one evening. As you might know, 'queer' means something outside of the norm, something rare, but this felt like the opposite. It felt normal and sane. Here people of all genders were dancing with each other, just one human being with another human being.

At all the other places there was this weird thing going on - every dancer belonged in one of two groups and the groups behaved completely different from each other! They dressed distinctly, so one could easily recognize to which group a person belonged, and almost all people of the one group exclusively followed, and almost all of the other group exclusively led. The really crazy thing? They couldn't choose which group they want to belong to. Instead, it was determined by gender, whether they had a penis or a vagina. This didn't sound normal to me...

My feelings of awe were reinforced at the workshop the next day. The teachers were Cristian Miño and Fernando Gracia. They proposed to abandon roles completely and instead to have both partners give impulses and to create a flow of energy out of these impulses. For me, this workshop was one very long wow-moment. Afterwards, my partner and I were driving home through heavy rain. I broke our stunned silence and said: "I want to chuck everything and go to Buenos Aires to dance Tango!"

Although we were wise enough to wait a year, and finish our university studies, we did fly to Buenos Aires. Here in BA we started freelancing, discovered a different lifestyle and changed all our plans for the future. No PhDs, no careers in science. Instead: living a free life, traveling and dancing through the world.

You might wonder why Tango alone was not enough to bring me to this decision? Here's why: Tango is like a passionate lover and a person with a long and complicated life, a life that has led to a really nasty characteristic: she's so sexist I could not have gone into a committed relationship with her. But then I met her equally attractive sibling Queer Tango and she's really kind and treats me well. She's someone worth traveling around the globe for.

I am a Gender Equalist

As mentioned above, sexism is deeply rooted within Tango. For me, it was definitely the environment where I experienced the most sexism in my adult life. There was a constant separation into men and women. In Germany, practically no one used gender-neutral

terms for tango. It was always "men have to do this and women have to do that." If you didn't play along, you got corrected: after doing an aggressive embellishment while following, I was told, "No, only men can do such an embellishment. It's not elegant enough."

This separation started draining me. I also noticed that a lot more men asked me to dance when I wore skirts or dresses - the shorter the better. And some partners thought it was okay to fondle my back or my hand while in the embrace - in a way that clearly wasn't part of the moves. I felt objectified, and it made me angry. After ten months of dancing tango I had to do something. I started leading. This made me definitely feel better. But then, it also introduced me to a new form of sexism. Now I got punished for breaking the rules and taking the role of the 'other.' Sexism was often subtle and almost never said with malevolent intentions. But it was there. Here are two examples:

- I was told, "You are the best female leader I know." (This is bad, because it implies that being a woman has an impact on the quality of leading. For comparison, no one would say "You are the best female follower I know".)
- After leading a sequence badly, I was told, "See! This is why Argentines don't want women to lead." (This is bad, because it implies that this opinion is justified.)

Well, this sucked and possibly even slowed down my progress in leading. Suddenly, I was in a minority - something I wasn't used to.

I intend to do my part to bring society further towards gender deconstruction. You could call me a gender equalist. It could get really lonely in the tango world. Sometimes I desperately thought, "Is nobody else questioning this? Hello? Are you all just accepting this? You wouldn't accept it if they taught cooking to girls and technology to boys in schools, because, well, that's how the gender roles are. Or would you?"

You might ask how Queer Tango could have helped me in this aspect? Wasn't it the case that dancing 'queer' got me those problems in the first place? Yes, but it was still a thousand times better than enduring the sexism of the rest of the Tango world. Miraculously it was in Buenos Aires that I found a solution contrary to my expectations. Everyone had warned me about the omnipresent machismo and sexism I would encounter there. The thing with Buenos Aires is that the Tango scene is so big that it allows for subcultures. One of those is the Queer Tango community. They showed me that there were others who had been fighting and questioning, too. I had found my partners in crime, but that wasn't the only thing the Queer Tango community had to offer...

I am a Sexual Person

A surprise came with joining the Queer Tango community.

In the past, a certain combination of three characteristics had always diminished my experiences:

1. I fall into the LGBTQ category
2. I have a passion that takes most of my free time, thus preventing me from going to LGBTQ events
3. My 'gaydar' or 'queerdar' is terrible

I am pansexual, which means that I am attracted to persons regardless of their sex or gender (I prefer this term to bisexual as it doesn't imply that there are only two sexes/genders). I spend my time at milongas rather than at LGBTQ clubs or parties because I am a Tango addict. And my queerdar is pretty non-existent. Darn! But at queer milongas I could once again enjoy the eroticism that comes with dancing in general and Tango in particular. Not to mention the flirting beyond the dance floor.

But wait a minute, as a pansexual, can't I just have flirting and eroticism with the opposite sex at 'normal' milongas? Yes and no. I can, but getting pressed into a gender category (I am usually perceived as a woman) with all the attendant restrictions and beauty ideals is a turn-off. What if I like men in high heels? What if I like women with penises? What if I like androgynous persons? Let's just say the more I identified as genderqueer, the less sexy heteronormativity and gender norms became. Queer Tango played a role in that, too.

I am Genderqueer

At some point along the way, I started to identify as neither woman nor man. I experimented with androgynous clothing, with a new name and haircut. And I loved it. Now, what has Queer Tango to do with that? Dancing the lead was my first big break with gender norms on a more bodily level. I always did a lot of stuff that society considers 'masculine' - or that males are considered better at. Some examples are: science, pen and paper role-playing gaming, programming, reading science fiction. All of those things are on a very intellectual level. Dancing, on the other hand is very physical. I discovered that I like to mix traditionally 'male' and 'female' movements in both roles. This gave me the curiosity and the courage to start playing with gender norms on the physical level outside of dancing, too.

I am a Dancer

The changes that Queer Tango has brought to my Tango are not as simple as just adding another role. The main points that changed in both roles were: my aesthetics, my technique, and my Tango philosophy.

Learning both roles gives one a much more complete understanding of Tango. Suddenly, the dots connect and I can see the red thread. Once you see how many elements are the same for both roles, you conceptualize them in a different way. Thus, I started to adopt a more general technique instead of a leader technique and a follower technique. However, for me it's not only about dancing two roles.

It's also about mixing elements of both roles: I do (hopefully) elegant embellishments while leading, and I make strong and energetic movements while following. Again, this form of dancing feels more complete. Instead of restricting myself, I can use the whole repertoire of tango movements when I interpret the music.

Queer Tango changed my intellectual understanding of the dance. I have to use metaphors here, as the technical details of the dance aren't sufficient. Physical concepts like disassociation, the movement of a leg, or muscle, can describe figures and techniques, but at a linguistic level these don't offer any answers to questions like 'What does Tango mean for you?', 'How do you feel when dancing?', etc. Before, I would have used 'lead' and 'follow'. I might have said something like a friend of mine did: "As a leader, I want to be the wave the follower is surfing on." But Queer Tango showed me that you can

fully disintegrate the two roles, if you want to, and since then, my answer to the question 'What does Tango mean for you?' is: a conversation. The best conversations

- ...inspire me
- ...make me happy
- ...let me feel a deep connection with my counterpart, be it with my life companion or with someone I have just met
- ...make me stop thinking about what to say and just go with the flow.

I might be so fascinated by my conversational partner that I prefer to listen a lot, or the other one is a bit shy, so I talk more than them, but the important thing is that this can change at any time. No one is gagged or forbidden to speak.



Alex Gastel and their partner Benjamin Layer. Courtesy of Alex Gastel.

I followed from the first

© Paul Fairweather

It started when a German lesbian friend of mine living in Manchester took me to a milonga and said have a go. She had been dancing a long time and led as well as followed. You can't really have a go as a leader, but as a follower with an experienced leader you can have a reasonable dance from the start.

I was immediately hooked. I think it was the fact that it was a completely improvised dance and that I loved the music and the sense of connection that you can get.

What happened next was that I realised that Ray Batchelor, the gay partner of a friend of mine from college, was a tango dancer and over the next year, whenever I was in London, we danced. With some impromptu lessons on the dining room floor and much patience on his part, we went to a number of milongas in London. He led and I followed. Then – in about 2008 – I sensed it was very unusual for two men to dance together and especially for a man only to be able to follow. There was much looking at 'man on man dancing', but very little hostility and increasingly, a lot of people smiling!

After about a year I decided, I needed to take some lessons, so I started going to various classes in Manchester where I live, leading in the beginners' class and following in the intermediate class. The teachers were very supportive and said it was fine to follow. In the class you change partners all the time and most of the guys were fine about dancing with me.

For me, this is an indication of real social change. Even 10 years ago I think there would have been far more resistance to the idea of two men dancing together. After 5 years as part of a small tango community, I have some great male leaders who are very happy to dance with me. The fact I can now lead and follow is useful in the class if they are short of followers. I think my participating in the mainstream community and getting to know people and being willing to dance with a wide range of people has all helped.

Now, dancing both roles, I feel following is what I enjoy most, as well as having the opportunity to change roles (dance *intercambio*) within a dance. I enjoy the more subtle ways you can interpret the music as a follower. I am now really enjoying leading as well and think my leading is influenced by the fact that I started as a follower. I think it has helped me learn that the key is having a good connection, listening to the music and not trying to lead steps that I can't really lead.

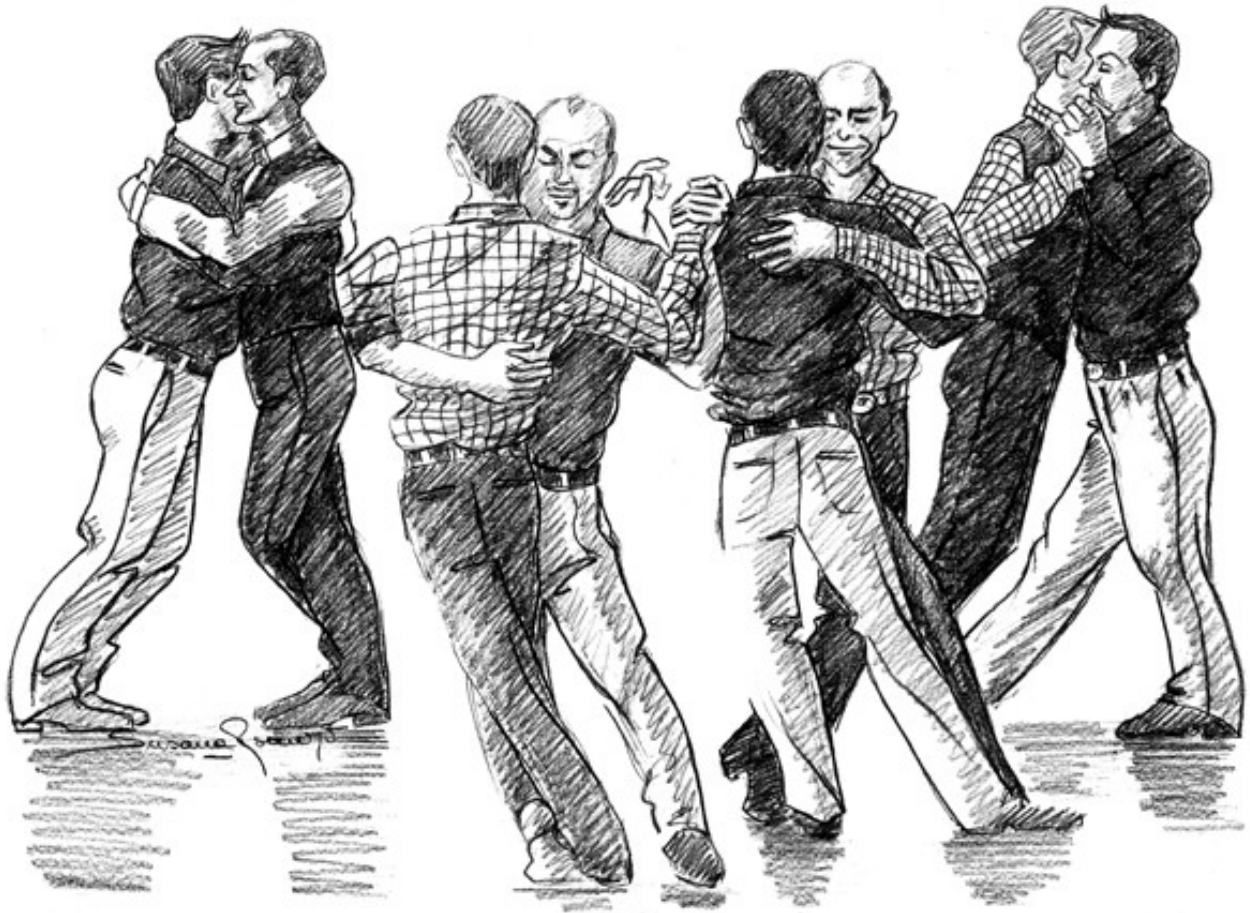
I dance in London at Queer Tango events and abroad at international Queer Tango festivals. For me, dancing in an environment where many people can lead and follow or are relaxed about leading me, is great. I have also found at Queer Tango festivals a real sense of family, genuine community and willingness to dance with a wide range of people and in very creative ways.

For me it is more about the willingness to be open to dancing in different roles, than being defined by your sexuality. I have also experienced in some mainstream tango festivals far more people interested in dancing both roles and a similar relaxed atmosphere. As I get older, and as the world changes, for me it is important to feel that I am able to go

anywhere and dance with whomever I choose rather than only being able to dance in certain places.

I like being more inventive now and more able to interpret the music. I like being an active follower and decorating in both roles. The moments of an excellent, magical connection lifts you to a different place.

Tor and Hartmut – Drawing
© Susana Romero



Tor and Hartmut. © Susana Romero

The Masochistas of Tango

© Carolina De Beus. Translated from Dutch by Elsje Claessens.

To me, tango seemed like an enormous amusement park for leaders. All they have to do is the cabeceo and the ladies go “yes, I do!”. Pfft!

As I write this, I realise how ambiguous things have become for me since I started leading.

Eight years ago in 2006 I started to dance tango, thinking it really wouldn't be my kind of thing.

But when I did it anyway, I was hooked.

Almost all my female friends did it.

But I stuck to my guns because I knew I couldn't let myself be led. It's contrary to my nature.

Moreover, every Monday night, after yoga, I had to listen to all my friends' stories about their dreadful weekend at the tango salons they called 'milongas'.

How they desperately wondered why they had not been asked by this or that man even though last time they had danced together so wonderfully.

I was fed up with the tragic, almost pathetic wallflower stories of these friends who all considered themselves awfully good tangueras.

So I came nowhere near tango.

Until one sensual summer night a man in the street convinced me.

He saw me and asked if I was a tanguera.

“No”, I firmly answered. “Absolutely not!”

He literally dragged me along to an open air salon on the banks of the Schelde.

The most beautiful location imaginable.

And the music that I had loved for so many years! All these people who danced together so serenely!

And so many of them! I didn't know this existed. A new world opened up for me.

I wanted to sit on the fence for a while, but my companion wouldn't allow it.

He immediately took my hand and pulled me to the dance floor.

And a good thing it was. Otherwise I never would have taken the chance.

I believe he taught me the basic steps while dancing. To be honest, I don't remember anything, except that it was simply grand!

I came home after midnight feeling one hundred percent like a woman.

I had been the centre of attention of a man all night long. He had held me in his arms and cherished me. Given me trust and trusted me. And all this, without words. I absolutely wanted to learn how to dance tango. Sure enough, because this was the missing part of me.

But that's where the trouble starts.

You have to find a partner for classes.

And then you lose him.

And then you find another one and so on and so on... The whole caboodle.

I don't like this caboodle.

So when, after a year, I had to find a new leader and had three friends who wanted to start

off in tango and were also looking for a leader, I set myself up as a leader and asked the nicest and sweetest one of them.

But let me tell you, women are no joke! They come late for classes and while you are stamping with impatience to get started, they still have to put on their shoes and tell you all about their troubled love life.

Only towards the end we got back to the connection we had at the end of the previous lesson. It didn't get us anywhere.

Also, this one dance partner rarely ever went to a milonga. And when I did, I was so focused on hooking a nice leader for a tanda that I seemed to forget that I was learning to be a leader myself.

Most of all, I didn't want to miss out on a single milonga dance.

The lady next to me was in the same situation. She said: "If I was able to lead, I'd ask you right away!"

That was my wake-up call. I jumped to my feet cheering: "Oh, but I can lead you!"

In my opinion milongas are easy. It's nice and fast so you don't have a problem staying in your axis and you don't have time to think. The thinking blocks my creativity.

It was so much fun that since then, whenever I hear a milonga I immediately jump from my seat and ask some nice lady to dance.

I derived advantage from the fact that I had already made friends with a lot of women in the tango world whom I could easily ask.

But it was milonga and nothing but milonga.

Until they played a waltz and a lady asked me.

I have to say I don't like being asked as a leader, but this lady was an exceptionally good dancer. "No", I kindly told her. "I don't know how to waltz."

"But if you can dance a milonga, surely you can waltz too!" she answered. "You just have to make a few more turns, that's all."

We did it and look, my cold feet for waltzes turned warm!

After four years of tango dancing I met a man with whom I hit it off in almost every aspect of our lives.

His leading was heaven on earth for me, so I quickly forgot that I wanted to lead too.

But when he told me he had registered for a series of men's technique classes, I felt extremely jealous.

Envy is always a good signal to me. It makes me aware of my own unconscious desires.

So I quickly registered for the men's technique classes too. And it was a revelation.

My partner and I then started to alternately lead and follow and that's what I absolutely like best.

But, like everything beautiful, this partner too didn't last.

He did grant me something though.

Grief, of course, but also the urge to start taking my leadership seriously.

To be completely honest, I didn't feel like dancing with another man/leader. From now on, I wanted to be in command.

I then hesitatingly took the step towards dancing tango, depending on the orchestra. I felt most at ease with Biagi. Vivacious, with a solid and explicit rhythm. Soon I started to like Donato, Fresedo and Calo. Followed by many other orchestras. But as a leader I refrained from leading Di Sarli and certainly from Pugliese. I only wanted to be a follower with these maestros.

I started taking weekly lessons again and attended a lot of workshops. The funny thing is that you then discover that it's not all that easy for a leader to find a good follower! But, as a leader, it does feel a lot easier and more natural to ask a follower than the other way around. Asking a man if he's willing to take classes with you is like begging. Like being dependent. Being the one to ask, as a leader, just feels right. What I do is I make a wish list, a kind of 'top ten' of the people I would like to take classes with. And I'm not afraid to ask the best and most beautiful tangueras. They're all pleased by my request because everyone enjoys being asked.

I remember starting a workshop in Amsterdam with a friend with an 18-year dancing experience, and all of a sudden I was totally tensed up. Where had I found the guts to ask her? Why did she accept my invitation? Could I live up to her expectations? But I'm a fast learner and we also just had a very pleasant weekend in Amsterdam. That's worth a good deal.

I started attending Queer Tango festivals. Just on my own. Knowing no one. And it turned out everyone else did know each other. It felt like one big queer reunion. And I felt like an outsider, not yet accustomed to the non-existence of rules.

The first evening I asked women to dance, but not men. Even though I love to lead a man who's willing to follow me. Only on the last day of the festival I understood: in Queer Tango you can simply ask someone and when you get to the dance floor you both decide which one of you will lead or follow. Isn't that great?

I'm not stuck in the Queer Tango environment though. But I always centre my holidays around a tango festival or *encuentro* (queer or mainstream). Being single, it's always hard to find a single room. All the offers are for two people and singles often get charged 100% extra. But eventually I'll always find a reasonably priced deal, and when I also manage to find a cheap flight, I'll register for the event. Imagine my surprise when I had to fill out my (non-existing) partner's data! The rebel in me wrote: "me and only me and myself". I dance both roles. Fortunately I quickly got a message from this Italian event that I was more than welcome. But that didn't count for other mainstream events.

In reaction to my registration to another event they coolly wrote: "Thank you so much for your registration to (...). Just tonight we received more than 100 single woman registrations! If you want to have a better chance to come to the marathon, then the best thing to do is to find a male partner and sign up with him once again."

That really has to change! You register as a leader and then the organisation advises you

to find a male partner when the main reason why I started leading is to become independent of male leaders.

You try your best to become an agreeable leader and then it turns out it is still about a gender balance instead of a balance in leaders and followers.
I felt like replying that unfortunately the hormone prescriptions had failed and that I was reluctant to undergo surgery.

These past few years I've led more than I've followed at the milongas.
For more than one reason.
The first reason is a very rational and plausible one.
I simply have to gain a lot of mileage as a leader.

The second reason is actually the result of the mileage I gained: the more you practice, the better you get and the more fun the leading becomes, making it easier to find nice followers.

And of course I love being the one to initially interpret the music. And if my follower does the same, it's a feast.

Most of all I no longer experience the tension of being asked yes or no.
No more fear of not or barely getting a look in. I can always dance.
In open roles.
It makes me independent and I love it for that. If I don't dance, it's my own choice.
My leadership has liberated me. I dance because the music asks me to and for no other reason.

But last but not least the main reason is that at the milongas the followers almost always outnumber the leaders. And in terms of quality good followers also outnumber good leaders.

So if I can choose between a great dancer who would be all too happy to follow me or a not-so-musically-talented leader who wants to practice some sequences and steps with me, my choice is easily made.

In the (ego) leader camp I do detect a well hidden conviction that I'm running with the hare and hunting with the hounds.

And I admit: I do.
With a lot of pleasure.

*This is a man's world, this is a man's world
But it wouldn't be nothing, nothing without a woman or a girl. - James Brown*

Straight Women in Queer Tango

© Sasha Cagen and Birthe Havmoeller (ed.)

Sasha Cagen in conversation with Helen La Vikinga at The 3rd San Francisco International Queer Tango Festival in California, June 2011, excerpt of the video interview: IdeaChat2: Straight Women in Queer Tango with Helen La Vikinga.[1]

Sasha: Helen La Vikinga is an amazing Icelandic dancer, who teaches tango in Buenos Aires. She is here in San Francisco for the International Queer Tango Festival. We had a great conversation yesterday about Queer Tango and how it is different than what I thought. And I feel that this would be a cool theme for a second IdeaChat. Basically just to kick it off, I thought Queer Tango was for people, who have same sex sexuality, but it seems like it is so much more, as I am discovering now from this festival. What is Queer Tango for you, Helen, and how did you get involved in it?

Helen: Queer Tango is, especially for me, when the roles [in tango] are not depending on sex nor sexuality. Because in traditional tango there is a man, a straight guy leading a straight woman. The woman is a 'follower' and the man is a 'leader'. In Queer Tango it can be man or woman leading, man or woman following. It can be a straight or a gay person, so the definition is open roles tango more than gay tango. Open roles tango that means that the roles in tango are not defined by either sex or sexuality.

Sasha: Do you find that most people, who are involved are gay?

Helen: It depends on where [you are]. There are lots of people dancing both roles. There are teachers working with tango. There are also people, especially women, that are getting more and more in the world of leading, because often in the tango scene we have more women dancing tango [than men] and they are just tired of waiting to dance, so they start to lead. They are straight. It is not about their sexuality. They just find a challenge in starting to lead and many of them like it. Often they like it much more than following. I think today, 2011, we are finding the role that we like more than 'because of the gender I have to dance this role'. And that is what I felt. I am straight, but I like to lead. I like to dance and for me the tango is just one tango. Hopefully in the future we will all be dancing together, straight or queer, man or woman. We shouldn't be divided. I can understand that in the beginning it is necessary [to be divided] so that I can have my own space so that I can lead. I can lead a guy - straight or gay - that is not important.

Sasha: I came to Helen La Vikinga's class yesterday. It was an all women class which was unusual and that part was "queer", but what you taught was completely the Essence of Tango. So it was interesting to reflect on that, because there was nothing queer about that. It was completely traditional, even the embrace was traditional close embrace, as opposed to the way a lot of people in San Francisco dance, which is more separate.

Helen: For me it is just one tango. I am teaching in the same way at a Queer Tango festival or queer environment, as I am teaching in a straight festival/ traditional festival.

Sasha: One thing which I found interesting is how sometimes the really traditional milongas in Buenos Aires can be oppressive in certain ways and that you find the queer space to be more relaxed. What do you think that the differences are? And why is that?

Helen: I feel that I as a person that know the milongas very well and their atmospheres, I feel it more relaxed going to alternative milongas like a gay milonga, than to totally traditional authentic milongas. There [at the gay milonga] I feel that the people go more just for dancing. They are not there to find somebody to date or for having sex. They are just there to dance at the queer milongas.

Sasha: Even at the traditional milongas they try to find another man?

Helen: I am sure that [all] places where two persons meet, if there is something between a man or a woman or between two gay persons, that is of course not wrong either, but maybe the purpose for going there was not to find somebody to sleep with. I feel: the purpose for going there is to dance and if something happens, that is just fun! While often in the fancy milongas it is often a hard competition [between the women]. There are lots of young girls and foreign women, who are also coming over. And the guys they are not so many so they can choose from all this crowd of women. (...) All the Argentine women above 45 don't even go to these milongas, because they know that nobody will ask them to dance, when they have this crowd of young beautiful women from abroad. They don't even have to dance good to be asked to dance, where as the Argentinian woman may be a really good dancer, without being asked to dance because she is not 30 but 50, and they know that they will not end up having sex... so why ask her to dance?!

Sasha: The custom is to ask someone to have coffee at 3 am. That is the clue word?

Helen: Yes, or champagne...?

Sasha: I have been one of those women. Showing up and going to milongas. Not always being asked to dance, but getting asked to dance enough - you know, as a real beginner. It is talking to you about that whole situation, gave me a sort of eye-opening perspective about the whole situation and flow of many women coming through, and how that dynamic just gets repeated over and over again, and then talking to you about the queer stuff made me think, OK maybe that is more relevant for me... even though I am not gay. But I wonder, if I would get asked to dance as a follower at a queer milonga?

Helen: Yes, that is, no... It is like at every other place, at small places you have to get acquainted first, before someone will ask you to dance. It is not because you are not gay that nobody asks you to dance. Like in the queer milonga in Buenos Aires it is maybe 50 % gay and 50 % straight.

Sasha: Were you one of the first queer people to get the queer tango scene going in Buenos Aires?

Helen: I was maybe one of the first people to have traditional milongas, which were "gay friendly" or where same sex [people] could dance together. As a woman [leader] I was leading many friends, and many girls, ... and at our milongas I wanted to have a milonga space, where people could dance with same sex or not same sex . I don't care. As long as people are respecting each other on the dance floor, I don't care, who is dancing with whom. (...)

Sasha: It seems like Queer Tango is much more common in San Francisco, men following and women leading. I feel that I never saw that at a traditional milonga in Buenos Aires.

Helen: I think in general that it is more common outside Buenos Aires, especially in the north of Europe. Not the south of Europe but in the north of Europe it is quite common to have guys, who are dancing together. Two straight guys who are dancing together just trying both roles and so on... And as I said before, lots of women are leading and some women are really good leaders.

Sasha: What are the qualities of a woman leader that are different than a man leader?

Helen: I think women leaders often are more sensitive and more soft in their leading. Sometimes it is negative, because they need more power, force and stability and at the same time they have more feelings... They can imagine better how it is for the follower. Why often guys, they are just leading and not thinking about how it is to be a follower. So when I dance with a woman leader it is often a little bit more sensitive, more soft. My experience, as a teacher, is that many women, they are really fast to learn to lead. Much more surprisingly fast.

Sasha: Are those women, who have followed for a while already?

Helen: Yes, of course, lots of them. Not all of them. It is maybe because they have already some body awareness. They are doing other things, yoga and other dances, etc. It has surprised me sometimes, when I am working. Sometimes I am working with straight partners or gay partners. I remember one of them, who was not used to the Queer Tango, but he worked with me in a Queer festival. He was totally surprised at how fast the women were learning. At the first class the women were already leading. [He said:] "It would take us months and years to learn to lead, and they are already leading!" He was much surprised. - So it is not only me.

Sasha: It is basically a truism, that it is so much harder to lead, than to follow or to learn something. That is interesting.

Helen: It is a generalization, but maybe that is to do with women are often more capable at doing more things at the same time.

Sasha: Multitasking.

Helen: Maybe it is that they are more used to like doing lots of things. She can lead and think about somebody behind ... and at the same time think about how it is for the follower. If I do this will that then affect her. On the other side, men, they get more technical. It is like some "motor" or "engine" that they are studying. - I don't like generalizations so much, but this is what I have experienced.

Sasha: And men followers?

Helen: Men followers, they often say themselves that because they are usually bigger, heavier [build], with the muscles and the skeleton, etc... it is a little bit more rigid usually, but there are exceptions of course. It is not like this softness... [which women followers

have]. It is a different energy also. I love to look at two guys dancing together. It is a different energy between them and it is usually not this 'softness'.

Sasha: This is the origin of tango, right? Men dancing together, isn't it?!

Helen: They were rehearsing usually, of course there were gays there at that time like there have always been gays and will be gays. It was more that they were rehearsing or training, because at that time in Buenos Aires around 1880 - 1920 there were lots of emigrants. There were much more men than women in Buenos Aires at that time. There were lots of men coming over, who had left their families or fiancées; they had to be good dancers, so they would be picked to dance with the women. The situation was the opposite. Today lots of guys, they stop taking classes. They are not advancing so much, because they don't need it, because there are lots of women, waiting for them to dance. ... A guy that is maybe not a bad dancer, but not a really good dancer. He can dance all night. There are lots of women to dance with anyhow. While the woman has to continue taking classes, getting better, because she needs to, in order to have the possibility to be asked to dance.

Sasha: We were talking about this yesterday. You have the advice that women should say, "No", more.

Helen: They should be a bit more selective at least. Why should we give this power to the man that they can just stop... and don't ever care about being really good dancers, because they can dance all night.

Sasha: So you thought that when we say "No" more, then men or leaders are more likely to take more classes and get better?

Helen: Yes, I mean, it would not work if just I would [be doing] it, but if we get more selective. They are selective, because they are not dancing with everybody. They pick the good dancers.

Sasha: There is this whole vibe where the men pick. They just snap their fingers or extend their hand and you are just supposed to leap up and... This bugs me!

Helen: Yes... In a way it is also what tango is. It is a little bit cruel world. At the same time it is a wonderful world.

Note

1 See the full video interview at Vimeo: <http://vimeo.com/26247448>

Tango Portraits – Photographs

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Helen La Vikinga and Glenda Salas. © Carlos Blanco



Solomon. © Carlos Blanco

My Tale of Queer Tango: Near and Far from Buenos Aires

© Miguel Kanai, Miami, USA, 2014

This essay is a modified excerpt from "Buenos Aires Beyond (Homo)sexualized Urban Entrepreneurialism: The Geographies of Queered Tango", a peer-reviewed article forthcoming with *Antipode – A Radical Journal of Geography*. Please consult the original for references and citations.

I am a social scientist and academic geographer studying the rhythm of change in the world's cities. Originally from Buenos Aires but educated and living in the United States, I have spent the past decade trying to make sense of the urban landscape that emerged in Buenos Aires after the neoliberal barrage of the 1990s and the dramatic collapse of the Argentine economy in 2001. Chaos and destitution seemed to be spreading everywhere then – to an extent never seen even in the troubled recent history of Argentina.

Despite major shifts that have taken place at the national level in terms of economic and social policy since the recovery of the early 2000s, neoliberal forms of governing are alive and well, particularly in the discourse and public actions taken in the contentious realm of urban redevelopment. The perennial questions remain: what is the city being remade for? Who it is supposed to serve? Clearly, market logics and corporatized forms of power are now much more openly, and at times successfully, contested than they were in the heyday of planning as 'real-estate deal-making' of the late twentieth century. But because of this neoliberal urbanism has mutated too: it has become more refined in its governmental discourse and subtle in its areas of intervention. One of these areas is cultural policy, now redefined as a vehicle at the service of city- and neighborhood-marketing.

How does this relate to Queer Tango in Buenos Aires?

Let us begin with tango itself. Since the mid-2000s, each time I visited the city I have encountered more venues turned to the tango economy. These included exclusively-dedicated exhibition halls, 'boutique hotels', specialty shops, pricy cafés decorated with nostalgia and even themed city quarters, like the area around the Abasto market rebranded as '*el barrio de Carlos Gardel*'.

That is why I began developing research questions on the layers of neoliberal urbanism in this conspicuous tango boom and the broader implications of the production of a 'Disneyland of tango' on the social and spatial dynamics of the urban fabric. What did this market appropriation of Buenos Aires' most characteristic artistic genre and cultural tradition mean for the city? Besides reviewing governmental and media reports as well as the literature on the topic, I thought I would learn directly from the people involved, opportunistically honing my dancing skills while I observed what is going on. Yet my teenage memories of Buenos Aires in the 1970s and 80s led me to suspect that this would not be a pleasant experience. I had tried tango lessons briefly before leaving to study abroad. Would I have to put myself through a rigidly-gendered discipline? I did not subscribe to it back then and could certainly do without it now. I am generally left in peace to be a sexual dissident in American academia, with its professed love of diversity and tolerance for subjects like me: an unmarried and childless (gay) male in his early forties as a colleague once reminded me while discussing my work load and course scheduling. Then it dawned on me: arising out of the creative explosion that had taken place in the 2000s, I could now learn tango without stifling my sexual self.

And so my engagement with Buenos Aires' queer tango movement and gay milongas began. Even though they may appear to be a specialized part of what people in Buenos

Aires call the 'tango for export' complex – catering to international LGBT tourists and covered by the foreign media, these practices also encompass more politicized and dissident dimensions that are worth paying attention to: they are not only undoing tango's historical exclusions based on sexuality and gender regimes but some of them also seek to reposition the genre in the city and the world beyond the commercially-oriented realm of possibilities implied by globalized neoliberal urbanism. I do not wish to claim that the practices of Queer Tango in Buenos Aires constitute an extensive social movement, but their significance lies not in their size, but in the possibilities that they point to.

I proceeded to take classes at the gay milonga, 'La Marshall', which has been around since 2003. I took a few beginners' classes, which were taught in both English and Spanish. In these, the instructors spent much of their time on ever-changing groups of tourists seemingly with 'two left feet'. Overall, this felt like a rather stressful experience for most and would inevitably end up in a quickly posed snapshot before taking off for a more fun experience in the Buenos Aires nightscape. But I talked to the more experienced dancers who arrived after the class. Many of them seemed to be loyal patrons in a friendly circle where almost everyone knew almost everyone else. To be honest, these initial forays also helped me to balance my research-filled days with a recreational night-time activity, enabling me to socialize in a city where I had few remaining contacts, particularly since the death of my parents. By then, I had grown tired of going to LGBT places where, for the most part, the kids were half my age or younger. The broader age range, gender mixing and lack of obsession with young, athletic or thin body types differentiates Queer Tango from other gay environments in Buenos Aires, particularly the more mainstream cavernous clubs catering primarily to gay men with aesthetics too intent on mirroring fancy gay neighbourhoods in the west such as Soho (London), Weho (West Hollywood, California) or Sobe (South Beach, Florida).

As a clumsy newbie, I did not get many invitations to dance at first, but some of the other dancers started to recognize me after having seen me there only a handful of times – though others have continued to ignore me over the years: social distances, hierarchical difference and categorical exclusions do exist within queer tango environments.

The friendly suggestions of alternative places to go dancing while in town revealed what geographers like me call a 'contested territoriality'. Milongas explicitly designated as gay/queer take place only a few times a week, usually on Tuesdays, Fridays and sometimes Sundays. Regardless of gender and sexuality, any true tango lover knows that this is simply not enough – particularly if you do not live in Buenos Aires permanently and want to make the most of each precious visit. What some fellow dancers do – and I was invited to join them – is go to a careful selection of regular milongas, in a group. They would rarely go on their own, for then they would only get dances in conventional roles. But these places are accepting and no one would dare to openly discriminate against us for dancing however we wished, among ourselves. I could definitely sense more intense stares than I would have received if I had danced in accordance with the local heteronormative code. But, as my dancing got more polished, my personal impression was more that of a gaze in awe of the uncommon, than of disapproval. I cannot generalize from my own position. In the traditional tango world, a cisgender male like myself, dancing with other men in either role or even following from a woman may pass as practicing or elicit praise for his dedication to his craft – for example, you can only teach well if you know both roles and are able to dance them well. Yet highly proficient female leaders have told me a different story when venturing out of explicitly queer environments. Some of them reported that they continued to sense onlookers' disapproval when they were out on the floor, no matter how much technical virtuosity they had attained.

Queer Tango makes me feel like a participant in a politics of visibility

I believe that the Queer Tango-ing that I became a part of may be modest but is not negligible. The milongas where queer forms appear uninvited may be non-threatening environments, yet their inclusivity is not the result of commercially-motivated, official, gay-friendly designations. Rather, they constitute territories negotiated by us, the dancers ourselves. I remember that once, at the weekly open-air, admission-free Sunday afternoon event at the famous Plaza Dorrego of San Telmo, which some of my friends help to organize, I noticed that there was one man with a camera enthusiastically taking pictures of me, but he stopped the minute he realized that I was not just dancing with women. I had hoped that he would go home with a less essentialist impression of what the city and the tango are about, but my dance partner reminded me to stop philosophizing and focus on our steps. He wanted to have fun, rather than listen to an absent-minded academic ruminating on his next paper. In fact, this attitude of not explicitly politicizing or theorizing the practice is rather common among participants, who for the most part focus on its recreational and socialization aspects.

Visibility is negotiated across multiple fronts. The four same-sex couples who participated in the Mundial de Tango 2013 (the World Tango Championship) for the first time in the history of that high-profile event attracted a lot of local and international media attention. For those dancers, doing well in the championship (even reaching the semifinals in one case), meant first and foremost advancing their careers with a prestigious title. Professional tango is now a highly competitive environment in which any recognition counts for both careers and livelihoods. But the same-sex couples' participation in such a high-visibility context not only challenges tango's boundaries, but also challenges the wider cultural politics of sexual acceptance in Buenos Aires and in Argentina, a society where many believe that true equality has yet to be achieved here, despite recent political gains and increasing state and legislative recognition.

Festival Internacional de Tango Queer (the International Queer Tango Festival) in Buenos Aires has brought us a lot of visibility too. An annual event since 2007, the week-long festival showcases some of the most accomplished dancers and instructors in and beyond the gay/queer scene, alongside very famous musical groups, at some of the most renowned tango venues in Buenos Aires, such as the traditional Confitería La Ideal. In November of 2012, I myself attended the famous event. The criticisms I had previously heard of its commercialism, high prices and excessive courting of international visitors proved not to be completely fair. Workshops with instruction in English do cost more, given the additional effort and training required from the instructors – and the prices are converted to the more affordable local currency for residents and Argentines, a discount from which I benefited, without having to bargain much. Moreover, the organizers, dancers and instructors themselves use the event both as an opportunity to raise funds for their activities throughout the year and as a means of connecting with other queer tango communities around the world, where they tour for several weeks if not months a year, showcasing their craft and earning better wages than in Buenos Aires (common practice for many tango artists). Choosing a different partner or 'guest' international city every year helps them achieve this goal. While most of the guest cities are in Europe, the United States and Canada, Mexico City (which also hosts a similar festival) was once invited. The plan for 2014 is to invite Moscow, where Queer Tango seems to be flourishing even amid the harsh terrain of Russian homophobia.

The dichotomy of globalized cultural scenes in the South

Talking to other festival participants, I also began to realize that the well-known dichotomy

of globalized cultural scenes in the South – between wealthy foreigners engaging in ‘experiential’ edification and ‘exploited locals’ servicing them – does not readily apply to queered tango in Buenos Aires. The picture is more complex. Those involved in Queer Tango bring to it a mix of subjective sensibilities informed by differing degrees of global mobility, of personal freedom and by the effects of complex lives lived both in and away from Buenos Aires. Besides occasional tourists, non-resident dancers include tango lovers who visit the city repeatedly almost with the religiosity of a pilgrim as well as long-term expats, who have made the city their home and are not always employees of transnational corporations or have high-paying jobs in creative industries – I even met some arriving exhausted to the night milonga after two day jobs, but still ready to tango.

Furthermore, I got to know several Argentine émigrés like myself, who visit intermittently. In our conversations, in which we prided ourselves for not having lost our accents one bit, we recognized the fact that we were sometimes mistaken for foreigners because of our acquired manners and clothing – furthermore the fact that I currently reside in Miami makes me the subject of all kinds of bling-bling stereotypes given the predilection of newly-rich Argentines for the city. Yet I came to the conclusion that I had something in common with several other emigres: our investment in the affective environment of tango reflects our affinity with the city and its people with whom we share a biographical past, rather than a contextual present, since the present is mediated by careers pursued abroad, as well as the various forms of exile that many Argentines have experienced since the 1970s. Thus, queer tango offers sexual minorities in the diaspora an additional opportunity for symbolic belonging and instantiated (in fact full-on corporeal) engagement. More generally – especially for those living globalized queer lives in multiple and distant ‘heres’ and ‘theres’ – the ‘near and far’ which is central to this account.

Tango networks offer a plethora of what academics call ‘social ties’. These flows of information, collaboration and occasional assistance are not limited to material problem-solving vis-à-vis the challenges of South-North migration. They also facilitate trans-local friendships, romantic entanglements and domestic commitments across geographic distances, as well as helping individuals to come to terms with coming back home or to simply staying connected to their roots.

Queer Tango activism in Buenos Aires

But I would like to add that this solidarity extends beyond professional connections among dancers and trans-local inter-personal networks. For example, Edgardo Fernández Sesma, a long-standing gay activist whom I often met at milongas, regards tango as a cultural resource through which to call attention to homophobia worldwide, from his decidedly Argentine perspective. In May 2013, on the International Day Against Homophobia, Edgardo coordinated a flash mob at Plaza de Mayo, the most politically-symbolic public square in the country. The event, ‘Un tango contra la homofobia’ (‘A Tango Against Homophobia’) featured fifty dancers, each of whom wore a tag naming and shaming fifty countries where gay, lesbian and trans people suffer government persecution. The number of participants increased the following year when the event was repeated in front of the historical Los Laureles café in Barracas, one of the host institutions of the ‘Festival Popular de Tango de Barracas’, a grassroots tango festival that takes place in that neighborhood. On both occasions, participants came from Edgardo's social circles and from the multiple courses he teaches on ‘tango diverso’ (diverse tango) and ‘tango entre muchach@s’ (meaning tango between girls as well as boys – the @ symbol, or an ‘x’, represents both the feminine ‘a’ and the masculine ‘o’, in innovative, non-gendered uses of Spanish).

One of the classes Edgardo teaches at Sociedad de Integración Gay Lésbica Argentina or SIGLA (the Argentine Society for Gay and Lesbian Integration) is one of the most inclusive and open Queer Tango practices in Buenos Aires. Located southwest of the center, in Parque Chacabuco, SIGLA is more accessible for dancers coming from the greater metropolitan area than city center activities. Sunday afternoons work well for those who work long hours Monday - Friday, and the loosely-enforced '*a la gorra*' (pass-the-hat) payment system does not exclude those short of cash. While there, I danced with several male-to-female transgender people – who let me know that they would only follow, just in case.

Edgardo told me that his first priority is integration through tango and that he is aware that, for some of his students, SIGLA is the only affordable and welcoming space for them to dance in. SIGLA lacks proper flooring and has no air conditioning. Built underneath a highway overpass, it is not pretty. But it is economical. SIGLA is housed in a multi-purpose complex, built by a previous municipal administration, to provide affordable space for non-governmental organizations in the city's otherwise overheated real estate market. At our last interview, Edgardo mentioned that SIGLA's next challenge will be to integrate the local community – and particularly local senior citizens of all sexual orientations, who want affordable tango lessons. The group's queerness is only one of the challenges they face. Edgardo also found that younger students were averse to practicing with older dancers, who learn more slowly.

I hope I have provided you with a glimpse of the contested terrains where tangoing takes place in Buenos Aires, beyond the better-known dance halls and glamorized tourist circuits. As for myself, when I open my arms to tango queerly, I embrace not just gender-bending and sexual freedom, but also the yearning for a more inclusive society not just in Buenos Aires but throughout cities in our small world.

Come along. Let's dance together.

3. Rethinking the Dance

How to Queer a Queer Tango: queer strategies for dual role dancers

© Birthe Havmoeller

Argentinian Tango is evolving. 'Queer Tango' is one of the cutting-edge phenomena of tango in the 21st century. Dual role social dancers have been organising international Queer Tango festivals around the world since 2001, sharing their insights. This pooling of creative ideas along with the work of some dedicated tango teachers, each with a circle of students, are forming the new school of Queer Tango aesthetics.

'Queer Tango' is a social phenomenon, an experimental space and a modern international tango style coming into being, inspired by the philosophy of the queer theory, the oral history of dancers dancing both roles in the Argentine tango tradition and the need for 'safe' milongas where LGBTQ people set the agendas. Queer Tango is indeed informed by the lifestyles and values of LGBTQ people: we are here, we are queer! And we 'queer' our tangos!

The creative, fluid and improvisational nature of the Queer Tango dance style and philosophy make it difficult to define the dance. The moment we claim to have seen the truth and made a definition, we'll see dancers pushing the borders of Queer Tango, turning it into something new and even more exciting.

The Dual Role Dancers

The new dual role dancers in Queer Tango are straight and queer people, who practice dancing both roles in tango. The social phenomenon of Queer Tango is about the intense experience homing in with the music, being there, present with your dance partner at mainstream or queer milongas. We are out and proud, and have claimed the freedom to dance with whom we please.

The milonga experience of the dual role dancers is like a 'jam session'. The dancers get to 'play with a tango orchestra', using their bodies as instruments, cherishing the mutual obligation to improvise in Queer Tango; silently they embody their musicality and join the tango orchestra to dance their part in the creation of a lovely tango.

The general notion is that tango (the modern social dance) first of all is about the non-verbal tango dialogue between two people (the tango couple) and the couple's connection, which result in the emotions: love, joy, peace, fulfilment, satisfaction, creative ideas and improvised moves inspired by tango melodies and the tango embrace. The magic of tango is when the connection swings, and the most simple moves, such as *caminada*, make your heart sing.

Tango and Sensualism

The silent moments of perfect comfort, improvisation, flow and connection are at the heart of both traditional and Queer Tango. There are no words in tango. There is no need for excessive movements either when you embrace and connect with your dance partner. However, flow and connection are a must. So much so that when dancers describe dance experience other elements of the dance such as tango skills and dance figures come way down on their list of priorities, as a given (tool) by which the flow of inspired musical ideas is realised. We embrace and connect with our casual straight or queer dance partners to dance Queer Tango, because it is great fun.

In tango we offer our heart/chests/breasts to each other when we dance. The *abrazo* - a closed embrace or an open embrace - must be yummy! The quality of the dance is always measured in the quality of the embrace i.e. if the full attention and the 'real sharing' are not there, the whole experience is bound to go sour no matter how nice the tango melody is.

Once the 'connection' is established as a physical connection ('one body with four legs') and as an emotional attitude (the aim for the meditative feeling of 'being one' with your dance partner) the dual role dancers aim to remain present and connected with their partner during the entire dance, as they react and respond to each other by leading or following, whatever is appropriate in the spur of the moment and to what the music inspires them to express. The connection and focus on their dance partner's body language give tango couples their characteristic introvert look. The sensual closed embrace of a traditional tango and introvert look of the dancers often make spectators assume that the tango couples are in love with each other, but what we see is the dancers' love of the tango music. Queer Tango is the same but different! It is from the synergy of the dual role dancers that Queer Tango is emerging.

The wanting to be in physical contact with a nice body or a charismatic dancer governs many people's approaches to tango. The dance is both sensual and sexy, and mainstream tango has generated clichés and sends out cultural messages promoting love and sensualism all the time. The tango couple is claimed to embody the 'perfect relationship'. However, the mainstream tango world doesn't offer much in the line of role models for LGBTQ dancers, as it is almost exclusively heterosexual love and sensuality, which are on display at the mainstream milongas and tango festivals. The contemporary dual role dancers are now bringing a new dimension to the international tango community: a queer sensuality and an exciting innovative tango style.

The Embodiment of a Queer Sensuality

Dual role dancers embody a queer sensuality when dancing Queer Tango with a same-sex partner, as this sends not only a visual message about love, but one about deviant emotions, homosensuality, and homosocial bonding. Our dancing visualises a different sense of beauty, diverse gender expressions and interpretations of femininity/masculinity.

We are a diverse community of dancers: alpha males, bi-gendered, genderless, gender queer, gender fluid, non-binary, non-gendered, trans, third gender, transgendered, transsexual, transvestite, straight men in high heels, gay milongueros, straight tango teachers... dykes, butches, femmes, bois, lesbian cougars, straight women, queer women, alpha females, bearded women, female tangueros in drag, lesbian milongueras, women dancing barefoot and dancers who prefer to have no labels at all (!). We practice the dancing of both roles in tango and in doing so we happen to be questioning the norms of mainstream tango, a heteronormative stronghold. The stiff cultural layer of mainstream tango, dating back to the Golden Age of Tango, arguably feels a bit outdated to queer people in the 21st century, though the majority of straight tango dancers are still much in love with the traditional, gendered (heteronormative) tango experience.

The Queer Tango community and the new dance style of Queer Tango with fluid, open roles and a mutual responsibility for improvising are an antidote to traditional gender roles and division of labour and power in mainstream tango. Queer Tango is the latest in a long history of tango styles. Like all other tango styles it has its differences and similarities to traditional tango. And true to the improvisational nature of tango, how far away from the original tango each dual role dancer will take his/her/their dance it may differ a lot.

How to 'Queer' a Tango?

The general notion is that both dancers must practice both roles in tango in order to be able to dance a 'Queer Tango'. When dancing a Queer Tango the dual role dancers must be able to hold the mentality of being a leader and a follower at the same time: they lead while following and follow while leading! Queer Tango (the dance style) is not defined by LGBTQ gender experiments, expressions or the preferences of the dancers, though we love our community so much that we nurture the truism that everything associated with this community is 'Queer Tango'.

The Argentinian tango practiced and promoted by the LGBTQ/Queer Tango communities as an open role tango practice for straight/mixed couples or same-sex couples is associated with pride and queer political awareness among the queer tanguero/as around the world. Dancing a role in tango, which does not align with your gender is still so controversial a practice that we often hear about male and genderqueer couples and/or women leaders who have been expelled at milongas or rejected at popular (heteronormative) tango festivals. Understandably enough some of us rebound by feeling that when we dance Argentinian tango we transgress the line between being a social dancer and a queer activist, and we feel that all our tangos are 'queer'.

In Queer Tango *intercambio* (changing of roles) holds the status as the main grid or model for the improvisation of a 'Queer Tango'. The changing of roles, i.e. the shared leadership (and followership) and the mutual responsibility for the musical improvisations, is the core principle of this dance style.

However, *intercambio*, the creative exchange of roles is too simple a model for most advanced dancers. They know that, when a dual role tango couple start dancing and sharing their musicality, much more is going on under the surface than can be spotted by the untrained eye. They point out that Queer Tango has the potential to be much more than *intercambio*, with elegant arm movements and the fine improvised lead and exchange movements. The art of backleading in all its fine variations, routinely dismissed by the mainstream, may add a deeper level to our understanding of Queer Tango.

Backleading in tango is a phenomenon hidden in plain sight. The subtle art of backleading - where a dancer (male or female) in the position of follower leads the musical phrasing of tango at the same time as the leader is leading the couple's tango figures, following the follower's musicality while navigating the couple safely around on the dance floor - is an almost invisible skill. It seems to be a taboo in most tango communities, as it upsets the traditional power balance between the two roles/genders by reducing the leader ~ 'he-man' to being a 'follower'. However, backleading is very much a living part of the tango salon tradition of the 21st century; tangueras (straight women followers) are bending the lead of their dance partners. And the best leaders love this kind of response from the follower!

How to 'Queer' a Queer Tango?

Most of the old milonguero/as in Buenos Aires are said to know how to dance both roles in tango(!) However, as the old milonguero/as don't change roles very often in public, their 'passive' knowledge is not of much use as inspiration for the emerging dual role dancers. But a 'new' Queer Tango vocabulary is emerging as we are making our presence on the dance floor be read as a clear message about homosocial bonding, tango excellence and queer sensuality. Some tango moves look more 'queer' than others, or even better: they feel more queer and sensual if danced with a nice queer attitude. Some dual role dancers queer their tangos more than others, but all co-creative thoughts about Queer Tango are moving us forward, and life gets richer!

The fluid roles - the exchange of roles and mutual improvisation during a Queer Tango - honours the core principle of Queer Tango: the sharing of the lead. It can be done as elegant *intercambio* moves with gracious arm movements, when the dancers change from one position/ role to the other during their dance. *Intercambio*, with the physical change of positions sends a strong visual message about excellence to the spectators and there is no end to the creative figures in which you may exchange positions and/or roles. The dancer who starts as a leader may several exchanges later, be the one who ends his/her/their dance as a follower, i.e. no one gets to be more leader than the other, if we apply democratic decision-making and a pinch of queer attitude to our tangos.

Some advanced dual role social dancers and teachers question the value of *intercambio*, as the physical breaking of the embrace may potentially lead to the breaking of the connection and flow of the tango couple. Ideally the change of positions or lead happens in the vacuum of a moment of suspense, allowing but a moment's notice for the other dancer to adapt to the new situation. The amazing thing about Queer Tango is these magical moments, when you do not know who is leading whom!

The *mirada-cabeceo* may not give a straightforward answer for the dual role dancers regarding, who will lead their tanda, so the division of labour is usually up for discussion at the start of each tango. The beauty which we give to the moment of negotiating who is leading whom is important for the energy with which we start the co-creation of our Queer Tango. A Queer Tango must never start with a 'fight' for the leadership or the followership. You may not assume that the lead is yours just for the taking of it. And remember that the *mirada-cabeceo* is the best low pressure way to get your dances with people who are genuinely interested in dancing with you!

Queer Tango is much about giving your leader small 'queer' surprises, as you honour the mutual responsibility for improvising in this dance style. In Queer Tango a follower may at any time bend the rhythm and phrasing of their leaders, who true to their skills as flexible, alert dual role dancers will aim for harmony by following their followers' creative ideas. A part of the 'package' when dancing is the obligation to take in whatever the other gives to your dance and use it creatively without breaking the connection even if you do break the embrace. If your dance partner wants to 'queer' your tango, then you are in for a number of nice surprises, or unpleasant surprises if you are mentally 'sleeping' and dancing by 'cruise control'.

The fact that leaders and followers often have different steps and timings in tango, rather than dancing as mirror images of each other, makes many advanced dual role dancers favour emphasising different levels/voices/instruments/rhythms in the music. This highlights their musicality and floorcraft.

What would Queer Tango and same-sex couples do without flirtatious moves and sensual floorcraft? The latest tango trend encourages us to dance in between each other's legs. *Ganchos*, leg wraps, kicks, etc. are sensual/erotic markers applied to the dance. Unsolicited, teasing kicks or the gentle caressing of your dance partner's leg with your foot may send a deliciously queer message to him/her/them as well as to the spectators. *Adornos* with homosensual, erotic twists are nice ways in which to express queer desires and add some attitude/sensuality to your dancing. Straight tango professionals add something extra to their dances when they consciously use the caressing of their dance partner as an embellishment. So go for it! Dance with pride, be in love with your dance partner for the next three minutes! Dancing the melodic phrases of a tango with a hug rather than the traditional *abrazo*, a sustained close tango embrace, highlights queer desires and it is a lovely way in which we may add a bit of attitude to our dance regardless of our level of skills as dancers. It also serves well a queer message from the couple to the spectators.

The 'hands up' embellishment is an arm movement where the follower raises his/her/their left arm and hand to the same level/position as the right hand, thus the (nick)name, 'hands up'. When a woman dances this embellishment it is usually danced as a quick tada!, i.e. a power movement after which she again curves her left arm around her leader's neck. When a gay tanguero dance this embellishment, it is informed by a gay lifestyle, and the spectators may potentially read it as a nice camp display of a 'limp wrist', i.e. a semi-coded message about homosensuality. It is even sometimes danced with a I-surrender-to-my-man gesture. As a sensual marker this embellishment draws attention to the follower's chest and gracious left arm.

There is much vanity and egocentricity in tango. Shoes are very gendered objects and very important erotic markers in the Tango world. When you set out to 'queer' your Queer Tangos, your choice of dance shoes may add new opportunities or creative restrictions. Men in high heels look deliciously camp! Women in flat shoes may make moves, which cannot be danced in high heels, thus taking their individual dance style away from the mainstream notion of what is feminine/masculine and how tanguero/as should dress.

Testosterone tango, the absolute embodiment of masculine energy, maleness and showing off: the male couple dances a tango very fast with lots of high leg moves, kicks, *giros*, *ganchos*, lifts, etc. Lately some women couples have also taken up performing their tangos as testosterone tangos, visualizing their version of female masculinity as lots of fast tango moves.

The possibilities for queering your Queer Tangos by dancing them with an attitude which reads both sensual and deliciously queer to other queers are endless... and once you have caught the 'tango bug', the craving for the music and the joy of the tango embrace, it will change your lifestyle. You'll breath and live Queer Tango. It is all-absorbing!

Troubling Effects of Leader/Follower Terminology

© Juliet McMains

When I moved to Seattle from Florida in 2006, I was initially excited to discover that social dance teachers (tango, salsa, swing) throughout the city used the terminology 'leader' and 'follower' instead of 'man' and 'woman' to address students in their classes. This linguistic shift seemed like a progressive move towards being more inclusive for those who didn't conform to expected gender norms on the dance floor. I was hopeful that such a move could help to de-naturalize the relationship between dance role and gender, opening up leader and follower as roles anyone, regardless of gender, could occupy. The conscious rebranding of social dance terminology was to a large extent motivated by an interest in making the LGBT community feel more welcome in mainstream social dance classes. Century Ballroom, Seattle's largest venue for social dancing, was a major force in this effort. Since the ballroom opened in 1996, lesbian owner Hallie Kuperman has required that all her teachers use the terminology leader and follower. "You can't look at a room where 50% of the leaders are women and call them men. It just doesn't make sense," she explains. Although now the majority of her clientele is heterosexual and assume expected gender roles when dancing, same-sex couples pepper the dance floor at most events held at the ballroom, welcomed by the conscious employment of gender-neutral language in the classes. By the time I moved to Seattle, the terms leader and follower had become the default language of the city's social dancers, including tango.

Over the next several years, however, I was troubled by the casual use of the new terms and their shortened versions. When I blithely heard someone mention, "There were ten follows at the party last night," I would bristle. "You mean there were ten people who specialize in dancing the follower's role, don't you?" I countered. "You are talking about human beings, not objects." It was not until my tango mentor Jaimes Freidgen shared his belief that American women dancing tango have become more passive since the general adoption of the term 'follower' that I realized how the well-meaning change in terminology intended to redress linguistic discrimination against same-sex couples produced yet another kind of subtle discrimination against women. Just as calling grown women 'girls' or men 'boys' has the effect of infantilizing and disempowering them when repeated systematically, the effect of calling anyone a 'follow' over an extended period of time eventually produces an internalized sense of self as less capable of initiating action. I am not suggesting that the role of the follower in tango is less difficult or even less powerful than the role of the leader, but that the use of the noun 'follower' (and the more distasteful 'follow') as an appellation for a group of people has unintended negative effects on that group, most of whom happen to be women.

In Argentina, dancers in the straight tango community use the verbs *llevar* (to take) and *marcar* (to mark) to describe the action corresponding to the American concept of leading, and the verb *seguir* (to follow) to describe following. They do not tend to use the noun forms of these words and instead refer to *varones* (men) and *mujeres* (women) when calling on a noun to distinguish the two roles, even when women are dancing the role of *varones*, as I did in every class I took during the eight weeks I was in Buenos Aires in 2012. The queer tango community in Argentina has rejected these terms as tainted by heteronormativity and favors the terms *conducir* (to drive) and *guiar* (to guide) as synonyms for the concept of leading. They too, however, still rely on the troubling term *seguir* (to follow). When they do reach for a noun to describe the two roles, I heard queer tangueras use the terms *conductor* (driver) and *conducida* (driven), the latter hardly seeming less offensive than follower.

I recently came across psychology literature that helps justify my objection to use of the term 'follower' even though I have no issue with the expression 'people dancing the follower's role'. A series of psychological experiments have revealed that people view characteristics described with a noun (e.g., Heidi is an intellectual) as more enduring and central to identity than descriptions conveyed with an adjective (e.g., Heidi is intellectual). [1] Not only do such subtle linguistic distinctions affect how we view others, but they affect self-perception. In other words, dancers who are consistently referred to as followers will begin to view this as an essential and stable feature of their personalities.

What are members of the tango community to do with this realization? The effects of calling the two roles leading and following are not as harmful in a queer tango class in which everyone is learning both roles. If everyone dances both roles, no group is called followers on a consistent basis and therefore escapes from the effects of passive self-image development. However, shouldn't queer tango dancers be sensitive to the effects of language on all people, even those who specialize in only dancing the follower's role? Many queer tango dancers and allies object to a return to the language of 'men' and 'women' to describe the two roles, feeling that such labels marginalize male followers and female leaders (or people who prefer not to identify with either gender). Similar problems of outdated gendered language are likewise faced by other dance communities. In historic dance communities that practice renaissance, baroque, and contra dance, the terms 'man' and 'woman' are commonly used when teaching the dances. Teachers clarify that the roles are so named to reflect historical conventions, but that these roles can be assumed by anyone, regardless of gender. In practice, it is quite common to see as many women dancing the man's role as dancing the woman's role, and vice versa, enacting in practice the teacher's words that these roles can be divorced from gender. Such a strategy works well in these communities because in none of these dance forms is the man's role so significantly different from the woman's role that dancers cannot easily switch between roles. In tango (and indeed other modern social dances like salsa and swing), the two roles differ so significantly that many people specialize in only one role. Thus, use of the terms man and woman in most tango classes not specifically identified as queer would not serve the denaturalizing function they serve in historical dance communities where gender becomes a technique that can be learned and reassigned fluidly. Ironically, queer tango classes are better positioned to effectively detach the language of male/female from gender identity through a re-employment of the terms 'man' and 'woman' because so many people in the queer tango community cross 'traditional' gender roles in the dance. Beginning a sentence with "when I am dancing as woman..." (or "when I am dancing as man") can reveal the constructed nature of gender roles and indeed gender itself. Many queer tango dancers will rightly worry, however, that the strategic deployment of gendered language in order to deconstruct it will backfire and reinscribe the binaries it seeks to dismantle.

I have no easy solution for this conundrum. I hardly think it's realistic to expect dancers to diligently avoid the noun form and consistently address 'people skilled at dancing the follower's role' instead of the shorthand 'followers.' Should we employ a new term entirely for the concepts of leading and following? Perhaps 'proposers' and 'interpreters' better describes the two roles. One individual proposes a movement and the other interprets that proposition, decoding subtle physical cues and translating them into overturned *ochos*, playful *sacadas* and spirited *boleos*. It is time to update our language so that it reflects the very active contributions of both individuals in the tango partnership.

Note

1 Gregory M. Walton and Mahzarin R. Banaj, 'Being What You Say: The Effect of Essentialist Linguistic Labels on Preferences', *Social Cognition*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2004): 193–213.

Tango Portrait – Photograph

© Sofia Silva



Olaya and Darío. © Sofia Silva

Coming Out to Dance: or getting it straight – a re-examination of the relationship of Queer Tango to the tango mainstream

© Ray Batchelor

Like many who dance the Argentinian Tango, I am driven to dance. In a life crowded with life-affirming activities, tango gives me more pleasure, more joy, a greater sense of being fully alive and makes me more content than almost anything else I do. Barring physical impairment, I cannot imagine not wanting to dance, not wanting to dance regularly or not wanting to try to dance well.

I began dancing tango in 2003. In 2008, when Tim Flynn founded Queer Tango London, apart from some valuable pioneering activities sympathetic to the concept initiated by Lora Hudson and some other unconnected events, Queer Tango barely existed in London. Ever since I noticed that Queer Tango was growing in London, I have kept a 'Queer Tango Diary'. When I began dancing Queer Tango at mainstream venues in about 2010 - initially almost exclusively as a leader dancing with another man - we were something of a spectacle. People watching us had never, or only rarely, seen two men dancing together, and stared at us in undisguised surprise. I confess, we quite enjoyed that. Things have changed since then. One of my typical diary entries gives a flavour of emerging practices: 22nd June 2012, written on the train home from Carablanca, a long-established, popular, mainstream London milonga:

A thoroughly enjoyable and Queer Tango evening. I arrive in the middle of a complex class about *sacadas*. Very interesting. With my arrival, there are... two men left over. One - we are not sure if he is gay or not and what does it matter? - immediately offers to lead me and then be led by me. Another, this time a complete stranger, offers the same. Both, wholly comfortable. Finish class not quite getting it and leading women. All very enjoyable.

Then the dances: I dance with Erika - delightful synergy (built up over years), firing on all cylinders; with a slightly demanding exotic academic – in her 60s?; and with Chris. He and I have not danced for months but after a few minutes on the dance-floor re-establishing relations, we dance our dance (strictly speaking, 'dances' as we swap roles between and within) and they are good. With the lovely, relaxed and stylish actress; with the author, always up to something interesting, just back from Texas.

A woman I had danced with in the class...not met before and liked, is not wearing high heels. I see her lead. Later on I ask her if she would be prepared to lead me. She acquiesces, but her following is better than her leading and my following is undoubtedly worse. So, after some good-natured to-ing and fro-ing, we come over all conventional. As a follower, she graciously says, I am light to lead, unlike most men. I agree [that sometimes with two men], it can too easily turn into a fight. We laugh a lot and dance well... With Tony, last seen... at [a tango] event dressed in a red headscarf and Turkish trouser outfit as a... woman. Tonight, he is a man. We swap around. With lesbian 'J' from Colombia, one of the loveliest dancers in London. At one point in our bantering she asks, 'shall we fight?' and puts up her fists. 'No', I say, 'we should just keep being girly, which is obviously easier for me than you.' We roar!

I see Olivier, who has been dancing with many women, dance as a follower with the nice, possibly gay man from the class. Later, I do the *cabeceo*, and I lead him in a *tanda*. Most agreeable. Others, all good. Then Erika again and last dances with Chris. This is an excellent Queer Tango night out. Combinations danced in the mainstream

throng. Politics acted out. Some superb dances and a great many good ones - all joyous.

Queer Tango: origins and myths

The first Queer Tango event was organised by Marga Nagel, Ute Walter and Felix Feyerabend in Hamburg in 2000. Thereafter, countless manifestations of Queer Tango sprang up around the world, not least in Buenos Aires shortly afterwards and now in London too. Most of these follow a familiar 20th century model of LGBT practice: the making of the 'safe', and perhaps exclusively LGBT space where things that people do elsewhere – rugby, deep sea diving, driving vintage cars, tango, etc. – can be engaged with separately and comfortably, without fear of attack or ridicule.

As an actor with Gay Sweatshop in the late 1970s, I worked in just such an organisation, bringing gay plays to gay communities to reinforce a collective sense of a (then) gay identity the better to fight oppression. Queer Tango safe spaces give a great many, who might otherwise feel threatened and not dance, access to the unique joys of tango. These are spaces in which we can dance roles of our choice with partners of our choice. So long as there is a need, we must maintain these spaces because of the dangers arising from fear and misunderstanding on both sides. The nice young surgeon who sewed my head back together after I was beaten up ('queer bashed') with a lump of iron in 1979 said that if I ever lost my hair, the world would see the Mercedes symbol he had just embroidered onto my scalp. Ever since then I have felt with all my heart that the greatest long-term protection against violence and misunderstanding is not withdrawal (however necessary and useful in the short to medium term), but openness, transparency and engagement. In other words, the gradual replacement of the menacing and unknown 'them' with the more fully formed, less remote human beings. To an extent which younger people may find hard to appreciate, circumstances in this regard have in my own lifetime improved out of all recognition here in the UK, though we should never forget the dire conditions that persist elsewhere.

In 2012, Tim Flynn invited the charismatic Ute Walter to appear as a guest teacher at Queer Tango London. She gave an interesting and thought-provoking class. Walter particularly advocated 'active following'. She explained: rather than following the 'hetero-normative' conventions of tango, 'passively' responding to everything the leader leads, the follower makes interventions in the flow of the dance and sometimes takes the lead themselves.

Erika, mentioned in my diary, came to Walter's class with her husband, Martin. Erika and I had danced following a conventional leader-follower pattern for two or three years and I had occasionally danced with Martin, being led and leading, as well. As this particular exposition of Queer Tango was set out, I felt uneasy. In part, I felt this on behalf of Erika and Martin and other mainstream guests present whose dancing was being impugned; but it was still more because I disagreed (and disagree) with the fundamental premise, and felt obliged, respectfully, to say so.

I disagree with the notion that Queer Tango is primarily a riposte to 'hetero-normative' tango. Many practices which characterise Queer Tango today existed in and originated from the mainstream. A provisional list might include: women dancing with women; men dancing with men; active following (fine if done well, but optional); followers leading from the follower's position (ditto). But I take issue at a more fundamental level. I learnt to dance in the mainstream. From my personal experiences of it and my conversations with others who dance it, who dance it with me, dance it with others and dance it well, this one-way,

oppressive, 'hetero-normative' model implied in Walter's proposition and commonly cited in accounts of Queer Tango, though not unknown, is not a characteristic of high quality, 'conventional' tango. It is either a caricature taken from show tango (which, after all, kicked off the 'Tango Renaissance' in the 1980s following the fall of the dictatorship in Argentina, and which in the minds of many people 'is' tango); or the consequence of tango danced so as to resemble that model more closely, a set of practices with which I am unfamiliar; or within the subtler, social dance with which I *am* familiar, it is a consequence of bad leading.

Queer Tango and the mainstream: an alternative view

Christine Denniston, whose accounts of tango in Argentina in the so-called 'Golden Age' are based chiefly on conversations with those who were there, writes:

Tango is often perceived as a macho dance. The man leads, and the woman follows. The man gives the orders and the woman does as she is told. Natural as this assumption may seem, it is to misunderstand the nature of the dance as it was done in Buenos Aires in the Golden Age. In order to learn 'the man's role', a man was expected to put himself in 'the woman's role' until he completely understood it – until he had felt from personal experience exactly what the woman wanted and needed for her comfort and pleasure. Only once he had completely understood what the woman went through in dancing the Tango was he allowed to start learning 'the man's role'. This is, in fact, the antithesis of machismo." (Christine Denniston, 2007)

Denniston reminds us that the dance emerged at a time in Argentina and Uruguay when men vastly outnumbered women. Of those women, some were sex workers, much in demand, meaning that the ratio of men to respectable, marriageable women was still more imbalanced. In some contexts, the milonga was an opportunity for respectable young women to assay the characteristics of rival men as prospective husbands. As women could pick and choose, the competition amongst men for wives was intense. Few women, given a choice, would choose a man who arbitrarily imposed his will on her. On the contrary, the attentive partner who notices, is alert and responds to the person he dances with and devotes his energies to making his dancing partner feel good might be favoured.

Both this historical perspective and contemporary experiences confirm me in my view: Queer Tango as a riposte to 'hetero-normative' tango is a canard, possibly arising from an ill-advised transference of a genuine, if generalised sense of outrage at the oppression of women in a patriarchal society into a particular context where its relevance is marginal, at best.

Where are we now?

Today, in my experience, there is a busy two-way traffic between Queer Tango and the mainstream tango world. In London, we dance Queer Tango among and with those who dance at the mainstream milongas. This is happening elsewhere, too. Queer tanguero, Johannes Schiebel-Lauer wrote to me in 2012 of his comparable experiences in Berlin:

I have made very similar experiences here in the milongas. Dancing queer in a regular Milonga never lead[s] to any trouble, on the contrary, some people were even commenting in a very positive way. There is not much sense in keeping up boundaries therefore.

That which was considered an oddity but a few years ago is becoming familiar. Incomprehension gives way to ease and approval. Now, complete strangers regularly approach us and say how pleased they are to see us dancing together. It is as if they *want*

to dance in a world which admits and celebrates us. We are opening Queer Tango spaces up to mainstream dancers. Others actively seek us out and want to join us. If Queer Tango is inserting itself into the mainstream, the mainstream is taking a lively interest in Queer Tango.

In the English-speaking tango world a shift away from referring to 'ladies' and 'gentlemen' (or even 'the man' and 'the woman') with their respective pronouns, and towards using the terms 'leader' and 'follower' predates the first Queer Tango Festival in Hamburg. The use of such gender-neutral terminology, though not without its own problems, is increasing and it accommodates these changes and reinforces the normalising process which is at work.

The tango embrace is an exquisite way of being open and is wonderfully revealing of the people who engage in it, each to the other. 'Queer' is not just, or rather, not even a sexual orientation. It is, arguably, a social and political sensibility. Do you have to be LGBT to dance Queer Tango? I suggest probably not. It seems perfectly reasonable that anyone alive to this sensibility can dance it if they choose. Of course, it is perfectly possible to engage in the practices without the political baggage, although I would argue that this is simply 'open-role tango' and not 'Queer Tango'. Different people bring different qualities to Queer Tango which celebrates – or ought to celebrate – sexual diversity, rather than proscribing it. I like this queer openness. Logically, being LGBT should not be applied as a test for entry into Queer Tango. In the mainstream, women increasingly carve out opportunities for themselves to lead. It is harder for men to gain experience as followers, yet there is anecdotal evidence of more men asking to be led. My Queer Tango Diary again, 29th May 2012, at a mainstream milonga:

Interesting occurrence: straight man I have nodding, smiling, handshaking relationship with began idly and without intentions sort of passing me from hand to hand and then offered me the embrace, and then danced with me [him leading]. He then asked me to lead him. This I find interesting. It takes quite a lot of bravery to do that. Still he felt comfortable enough, and did. I admire that. ... also [I] think, in a way, it has some political value.

Queer Tango has fostered *intercambio*, the swapping of leader-follower roles seamlessly within a dance. Many Queer Tango dancers revel in it. Swapping roles, where the swapping takes time, only really works if a single dance is jointly being realised by both members of the couple and continues being realised – danced – throughout the changeover, be it ever so protracted. I dance *intercambio* with LGBT dancers as well as with dancers from the mainstream. Erika has learnt to lead. Martin has learnt to follow. She and Martin are accomplished *intercambio* dancers. As Erika says, 'It feels right for me'. And why shouldn't women lead men? Today, as part of this fundamental readjustment of how authentic tango can be practised, this too is part of the mix, and I attribute these opportunities in part to the rise and increasing visibility of Queer Tango. I have recently (2014) been encouraged to learn that women leading, men following and *intercambio* now figure as standard features of the offering of a straight, mainstream couple who teach tango in London. I suggest they would not have done this without exposure to and acknowledgement of the contribution to tango of Queer Tango. Yet another development: dancing tango without leader or follower distinguishes Queer Tango still further. I experimented with this during a memorable class with Mariano Garcés in 2011 given on a visit he made to London at the invitation of Nick Stone. I don't doubt it will continue to feature.

I suggest Queer Tango has drawn pre-existing practices together, added to them and provided an alternative historical and political framework within which they can be re-appraised, refreshed, given new life and worked into a coherent, vibrant and purposive whole. The model we have developed within the international Queer Tango community owes more to mainstream practices – historical and current – than is sometimes acknowledged. It grew out of them, and is not their antagonistic opposite. Each embodies truths from which the other can and does benefit. Neither has yet fully and publicly acknowledged this, although practices are ahead of protestation. This essay is an attempt to move that process of acknowledgment – be it ever so slightly – forwards and so encourage the process, because I want to dance in a world where that process goes still further. It needs monitoring. It needs care. It will take time. I am optimistic.

If you agree with the views expressed here, or disagree, or have comments, please let me know; but if possible, and if you choose, I should regard it as a favour if first you would dance with me.

We can always talk later.

Notes

Ray Batchelor, *Queer Tango Diaries 2012-2014*, unpublished

Christine Denniston, *The Meaning of Tango: the Argentinian Dance*, Portico, London, 2007

Queer Tango in London – Portfolio

© Denise Lew



Ray Batchelor leading Robin Summerhill at Queer Tango London. © 2014 Denise Lew



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Queer Tango and Milonguero Tango: a reflective essay

© Gigi Gamble

Since 1995, I longed for queer women to dance with in the milongas. Now Tango Queer is here and I see that I'm a tango fundamentalist after all. I thought that Queer Tango meant same-sex dancing. It doesn't. It's an expanded proposition and maybe tango needs it to survive another century. Time will tell.

I've danced a lot of different ways with a lot of different people in these years, and the milonguero style – street-y, simple, difficult - is the most intimate and rewarding way to listen to tango music that I know. It's a grounded, rhythmic walk, perfect for being alone in a crowd with a tanda of Canaro, Tanturi or Pichuco. But I'm writing this essay in 2014. I see an emerging West Coast Queer Tango style that macerates yoga with ballet, modern and contact improvisation. It's especially suited for dancing to Gotan Project, world beat, folk melodies, modern blues, Tom Waits' waltzes, or Piazzola's concert music. And it works on traditional tango, too. But it isn't what I imagined when I wished for a woman in *la ronda*.

As Mariana Docampo points out, Queer Tango is not about gender or sexual orientation. It's about being free of it. But I am beginning to worry that this freedom often causes us to throw out some codes that have practical uses on the dance floor. Additionally, our tango style – like much of tango in the San Francisco Bay Area - seems to be filtered through several kinds of body disciplines, dance forms and types of music. As we adapt the tango to our culture, I wonder if we are losing something crucial. This essay is a reflection on some of the aspects of these two styles.

The tango I miss in our milongas is the one whose posture has been described by Susana Miller as 'an elephant from the waist down, a butterfly from the waist up.' That *groundedness* lends itself to rhythm; the body serves the music. The partner's clasped bodies become as sensitive together as a tuning fork. Their movements are small because the [milonguero tango] style was developed on crowded dance floors. It has its roots in the 1930's and 40's eras of live music, crowded floors, practice at home with friends and relatives – it is colloquial.

That is not the case with our West Coast Queer Tango. I believe our roots are in the studios of yoga instructors, modern dancers, ballet dancers, and contact improvisers. We have some infusion of visiting instructors, whose backgrounds often reflect the same studio background as well. United States/West Coast Queer Tango has 'moves' which are a close reading of the human body walking. It expands the natural contra-body motion into a spiral, which the partners use to play with the axes of balance – sometimes shared, sometimes not. Replete with *colgadas*, *sacadas*, reversals of direction, *boleos*, *planeos*, *barridas*, *adornos*, and exchanged lead/follow, our Queer Tango is more like dance-lab exploration.

Beyond the style differences, though, I remember that some of the early proponents of milonguero style were not only gender fundamentalists, they were Tango Gender fundamentalists. Although times have changed, in the nineties, Tom Stermitz's 'Close Embrace' or 'Milonguero' weekends in Colorado assumed all followers were women, all leaders men, and registration meant adhering to these codes. Susana Miller referred to all followers as 'chicas', all leaders as 'hombres' or maybe 'chicos'. I don't know how many other closeted tangueras danced close embrace. Being bisexual, feminine, a follower, I often passed in silence. I organized one queer tango class in 2010, awkwardly brought

one of my favorite tango teachers to the local women's dance where we were instructors. Brought my butch girlfriend to one or two straight classes at Allegro Ballroom in Emeryville, a bitter experience that led us to Eva Pettersson and Valerie Fekete's dance classes. At that time, they were the only lesbian tango teachers in the Bay Area. Eva and Valerie taught us what they learned from Christy Cote, then one of the few Bay Area heterosexual tango instructors known to teach same-sex dancers. But what we learned first was the 8-count basic. This is the most common pedagogical tool in Argentine Tango; it's an expanded box step that is useless in *la ronda*. And in our same-sex classes, we chose a role and danced it, no switching that I remember. We were same-sex partners dancing a straight tango. Our instructors also encouraged us to look lovingly into each other's eyes. So we bumped into other couples a lot and laughed and had a pretty good time. Our frame was open and airy, our ochos were wide and cut a horizontal path like the symbol for eternity. But this 8-count basic (8CB) was not developed for the social dance floor, and I invested two years of exploration, un-learning the 8CB, listening and re-learning to develop a style that works on the dance floor. I came to prefer what is often called 'milonguero style' or 'estilo apilado': a close embrace (and almost always) following my partner.

Gay or straight, in the United States we seem to be uncomfortable in each other's arms when it comes to Argentine Tango. Add heterosexism to the mix, and maybe that's why close embrace never appealed to our community. Furthermore, close embrace seems to be armed with a closer connection to the *codigos* of the *milongueros* and *milongueras* of the River Plate basin.

Many of us have been so disrespected in the straight tango world that we reject out of hand any traditional code, like the *cabeceo*, for instance. The *cabeceo* is misunderstood as a way for men to control women in the milongas - to prevent women from choosing a partner. But in practice, the *cabeceo* means never having to say you're sorry. To *cabeceo* is to use your gaze to signal your desire to dance with someone without risking rejection or signal refusal without embarrassment for either party. Say you're at the queer milonga and you say to yourself, "There's that fine woman I see at Two-Step all the time; I'm gonna ask her to dance with me." You look at her steadily, hoping to catch her eye, but her gaze slides away from yours. That's a no. Or, if she holds your eyes, nod towards the dance floor or cut your eyes to the floor, then watch for an answering smile or nod. As singer-songwriter Holly Near once said, "We are a gentle, loving people". The *cabeceo* is a charged, safe, erotic way to ask for a dance. Silent agreements are made – very queer, *bajo y sucio*, like the park at sundown.

The social codes aren't always about policing gender. Sometimes it's just to preserve order on the dance floor. Milonguero dancing is very social, because it assumes that in a *ronda* full of couples, half of whom are blind [1], every *figura* must fit in available space. The first rule of social tango is 'engage with the floor'. Yet Queer Tango seems to assume that the first rule of tango is: 'engage your core'. Why? Because it's developed by professional or semi-professional dancers/ body workers. For Queer Tango, one should have good body awareness. (Can you find your psoas muscle, Dear Reader?) You should be able to walk very slowly across the floor in a step-pivot-step that winds you on a zig-zag path, where your balanced core and posture keep you sinuous as a desert snake on sand. I think of Queer Tango as a lovely, lolloping spiral dance that often uses a lot of floor space yet can be made to fit into a crowded social floor. But this expansion and contraction while shifting, balancing, and lolloping is not for the average queer off the street. Queer Tango is not social in the same way as milonguero style tango. It's really got roots in experimentation, and doesn't assume a crowd. It barely assumes a circle of dancers.

For all of these differences, there is one thing we have in common and it's the desire to walk over the threshold of the milonga and immerse ourselves in the music in each other's arms. As long as we have that, we have all that's needed, I suppose, and my comparisons and grouches should be left at the door. After all, we can always start another milonga, and over time, every milonga becomes a ritual site. It's similar to when religious people go to worship. They leave their petty grievances at the door and in the company of others lift their hearts to a greater good. For us, the greater good is the music.

Note

1 Blindly walking in the line of dance – i.e., following.

Hilda Hisas: pastels and artist statement

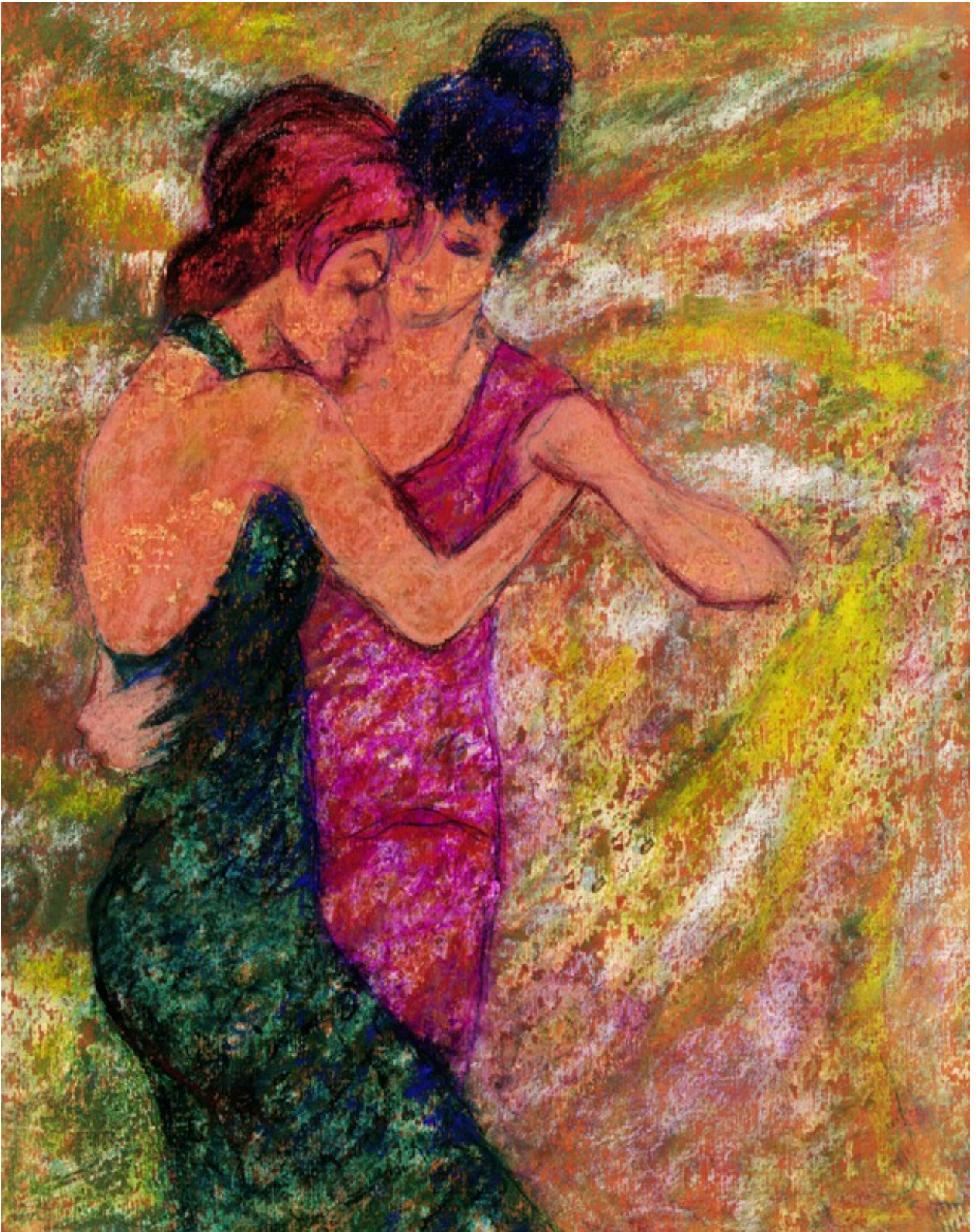
© Hilda Hisas



TANGO BRUJO, 35x25 pastel. © Hilda Hisas



NOCHE DE TANGO, 45 x 33 pastel. © Hilda Hisas



Almas en tango, 35 x 25 pastel. © Hilda Hisas

Artist Statement

© Hilda Hisas

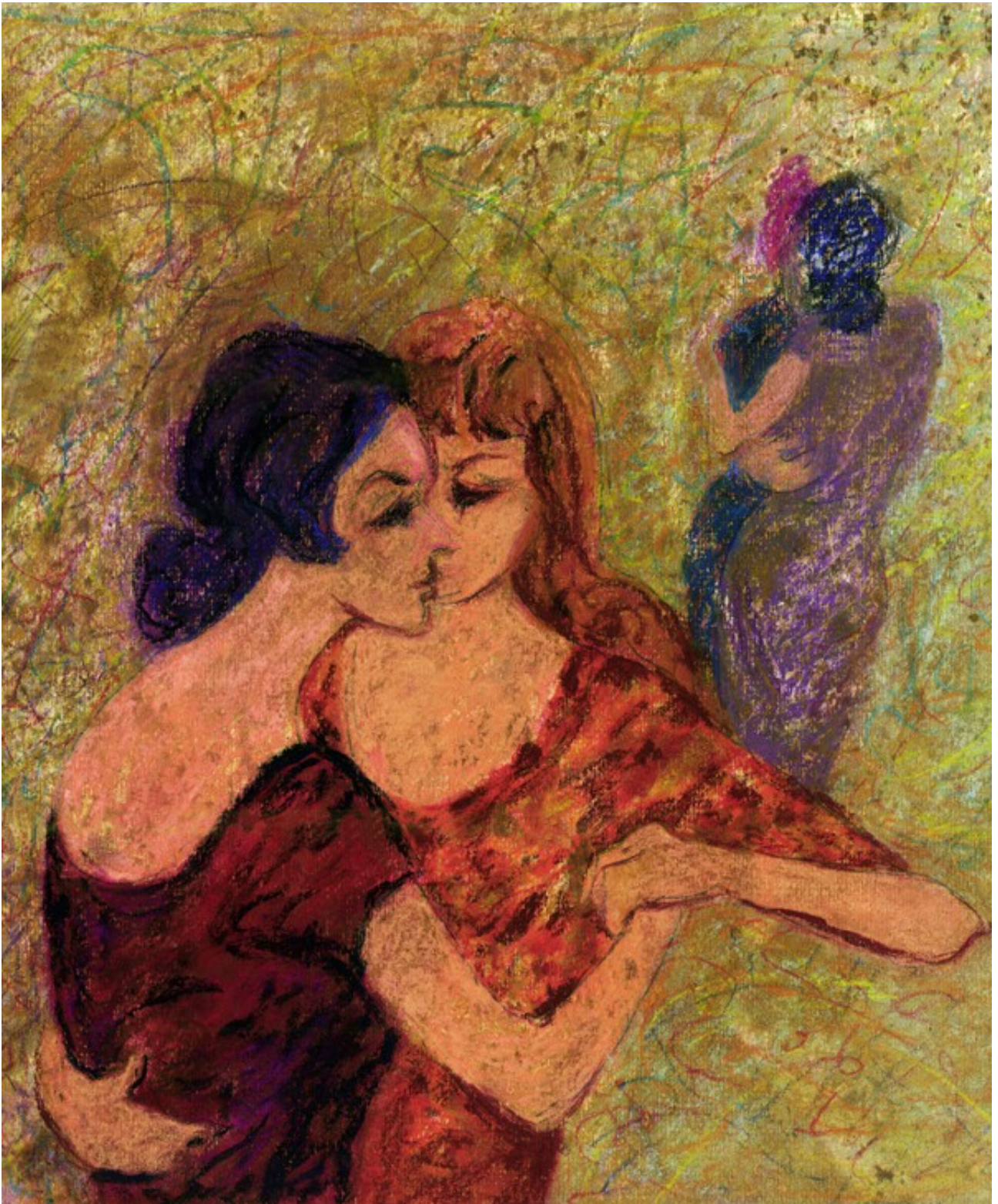
Hilda Hisas: I was always interested in everything human being and during a lot of years I drew with live models. I studied with the best teachers so I could express through the human figure all what I feel about life and people.

I've always heard tango while drawing and in a given moment I was invited to make a tango exhibition at the Academia del Lunfardo.

But only when I danced tango I experienced how deeply I felt the significance of this dance, because in those fleeting three minutes I was transported to another world, as if in a sacred rite.

I frequented many milongas and I loved the way that men invited me to dance from afar *cabeceando* (shaking his head). To deepen my knowledge about tango, I studied for three years at the National Academy of Tango: the origins [of Argentinian tango], the poetry of the lyrics and its dance expression.

So I approach Queer Tango as an expression of the wonderful experience it is to dance tango in different roles. Having exhibited widely [since 1969] I'm still giving drawing lessons at the Asociación Estímulo de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires.



Seducción, 34 x 30 pastel. © Hilda Hisas

Queer Canyengue Manifesto

© Olaya Aramo and Belén Castellanos

This is a sarcastic, romantic and anarcho-communist manifesto about a tango practice from a queer, feminist, anti-capitalist and canyengue perspective. The canyengue tango style is supposed to have been danced in Buenos Aires in the 1920s, and it is practiced nowadays by small groups in Buenos Aires and the rest of the world. It is a tango in which the axis is completely shared, with few figures and a lot of rhythm. We propose that you, too, should dance canyengue, rather than *tango salon*. Today, *tango salon* is usually danced at the majority of the milongas we know, with lots of figures and individual axes in the couple. In the concept of *tango salon* we also include the codes and customs of the milongas that we often observe in our tango contexts here in Spain.

We think that the practice of queer canyengue constitutes an alternative and a historical and political commitment.

Based on our experience as women dancers in the European/Spanish version of Argentinian tango salon, we declare that we have made this manifesto to re-propose tango to be danced with its African, *arrabalera*, *cabaretera*, *putera* and *travesti* heritage[1], and we consider tango salon to be evil/bad parodies of this.

We declare ourselves against:

1. Escapism: instead of sublimating pain through art, to assume the tragic character of existence, *tango salon* represses pain obliging us to smile and 'have fun'. This way, *tango salon* trivialises tango by neglecting its essence. It turns tango into a superficial ritual of gender where acceptable and unproblematic femininities and masculinities are performed. It establishes an anthropological individualism that is based on banal leisure and on elitist/capitalist professionalisation. The milonga 'code' (defining what is good/acceptable behaviour) is its fetish and the way it is reproduced.
2. The scientific metaphysics of embrace as a therapeutical normalising activity denies the power relations embedded in the bodies in tango and it substitutes them with a devalued fantasy of friendship and affection. This prompts a profound decay and freefall of affections which is actually its hypocritical goal. In this way friendship becomes a 'national reconciliation', a forgotten invisibilisation of the social conflicts of ethnicity, race, class and gender.
3. We do not share the notion that Buenos Aires at the beginning of the 20th Century was a land consisting exclusively of white, heterosexual, European men, the creators of tango, as it is veiling the contribution of women, faggots, *travestis*, black Argentinians and Indians. The idea that tango was danced between men because no women, only whores, danced it back then hides those men and women who wanted to dance with partners of her/his same sex, as well as the obvious fact that 'whores' are women, and not only women, both male and female sex workers who participated in the creation of tango too. Heterosexist, racist and class related prejudices presented in the tales about the origins of tango must be eradicated by creating alternative myths and by making further unprejudiced research which presents facts about the complexity of the race, class and gender conflicts in the *porteña* society of the last decades of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.
4. Individual axis. The anthropological individualism imposes itself in all spheres of life as precariousness. It conceals in professional life and personal life both solitude and exploitation. The recent transformation of the ways in which tango is danced with a predominance of *tango salon* (style) with individual axes and the tendency to abandon the *apilado* (shared axis)[2] and the milonguero tango (the heir of canyengue) reflect this

ideology. Tango dancing with individual axes implies a veiled exploitation in which we fake the true couple dancing. Against the constant affirmations that the independent axis and the separation of the tango couple in the open embrace are a desirable evolution for tango towards a greater equality and liberty for the dancing couple, we respond that an independent axis is far from implying women's liberation and tango democratisation. It is the triumph of the anarcho-capitalist individualism, uncommitted, de-eroticised, desacralised and denaturalised in which the relationship between dancers is reduced to a formal egalitarian contract, but, in truth, a servile one. The exigence of maintaining an individual axis is also accompanied by the obligation to use high heels which reduces the female footprint surface and pushes the woman to a precarious and fetishist equilibrium. Also by making women dance in an individual axis, an ideology of the *marca* emerges in which the man does not complete the movements (in the couple) but instead indicates the movements that the woman must execute. Mirror mimics instead of community of bodies; choreographic competitiveness instead of hermaphroditic complicity.

A Single Axis, a Single Queer Tango Body Politic

Individualism, as a way to understand the milonga code, the embrace and the technique of dancing, has triumphed greatly in the traditional tango scene, and as such class, racist and patriarchal myths have been created and are generally accepted. We understand that this is a process of eugenics, a desacralisation *trucha*[3] of the essential tango which we find in canyengue. Queer canyengue resists the capitalist and underhandedly patriarchal individualist discourse in which each dancing person stands on her/his own axis, and the *arribista*[3] discourse which appropriates tango and transforms it according to its values, celebrating it as elegant and standard for the tango style of the white upper-class. Canyengue favours the anatomic fusion of bodies and breathing together 'heart to heart'. This interdependency is the supreme quality of the fused bodies of the tango couple. The realisation of eroticism that implies the incarnation of death; the 'death' of the individual in the hands of the embrace is the essence of tango, and as it consists of a tango which is popular, anti-academic and accessible to all dancers, it is consequently an *orilla*, *arrabal*, *négritude* blend of cultures; it is crossdressing: a micro-resistance to city pacification by the State and the establishment. We consider canyengue as a tango that did not deny its instincts and urges, which did not offer itself as a stage for its domestication, but this instead involved the fulfilment of basic needs that lie outside mainstream moralism.

We understand that there should be a transformation of all these aspects. Together we must fight them by creating canyengue spaces that are anti-patriarchal, queer, anti-capitalist and communitarian. To be able to incarnate what we understand as 'Queer Canyengue' it is also necessary to transform the dance itself, involving our bodies in this transformation. That is why we propose:

1. A new tango dance genealogy that looks for the canyengue, recovering its spirit of communal celebration of pain and marginality.
2. We will look for this alternative genealogy not in the prevailing hetero-centred, post-colonial, *arribista*[4] historicism, but instead in the stories repressed by the authorities and marginalised to the *orillas*[5] of actual lived history.
3. For the creation of a true dance (practice, style and community) we need to fuse our bodies into an authentic, interdependent axis, so that they are fully untied from the heterosexist doctrine of tango and the milonga codes and customs, blind to the last ninety years of denial of the pure and genuine tango.

¡¡¡¡¡Muerte al tango macho y careta!!!!¡¡¡¡¡Larga vida al Canyengue Queer!!!!!!
Death to *macho* and *careta*[6] tango!!!!!! Long live Queer Canyengue!!!!!!



Belén Castellanos and Olaya Aramo. Photo by Idoya Calvete and Emilio Eiras.

Notes

1 *Arrabalera* = from the suburbs; *cabaretera* = from the brothels; *putera* = related to prostitution; *travesti* = related to transvestism.

2 We understand *apilado* as a way in which to move when dancing canyengue and milonguero tango. *Apilado* is the term for the tango kinetics of dancing with a shared axis.

3 *Trucha* is a lunfardo word which means falsification.

4 *Arribista* = upstart

5 *Orilas* = shores

6 *Careta* = posh

4. Performance

Tango Con*Fusión turns 10

© Chelsea Eng

WHO WE ARE?

Tango Con*Fusión is entering its 11th year as a dance company – working not only in the tradition-steeped, highly specialized genre of Argentine Tango, but also at the nascent edge of tango's fusion-oriented future.

Current Members:

Debbie Goodwin (co-founder since 2004)

Pier Voulkos (co-founder since 2004)

Chelsea Eng (co-founder since 2004)

Christy Coté (co-founder since 2004)

Carolina Rozenstroch (since 2006)

Former Members:

Michelle Laughlin/Gorre (co-founder in 2004)

Charity Lebron/Russell (2006-2010)

Mariana Ancarola (2010-2011)

This is our official statement:

It used to 'take two to tango', but the women of Tango Con*Fusión bend the gender-related customs of this century-old dance. As collaborative artists they explore the idiom of Argentine Tango beyond its traditional boundaries. As professional performers and teachers of Argentine Tango, with varied backgrounds in contemporary and classical dance, they create a fusion of genres within their choreography.

A couple's dance morphs to a solo or collective interaction, leaders and followers exchange roles, and free movement is added.

As women trained and versed in traditional Argentine Tango, they deeply respect traditional tango, cherish the experience of dancing with men, and love to lead. Their repertoire spans the spectrum from slick-haired classic to feather-ruffling experimental, with Argentine Tango as the imperative backbone of the work.

They have devoted themselves to growing the tango and dance community in the San Francisco Bay Area and (far) beyond for 20 years, including over 10 years as the collective Tango Con*Fusión.

But there's more to the story...

HOW WE CAME TOGETHER

January 2004 – A call to busy tangueras

Brigitta Winkler was coming to town. Christy gave me the low-down: "Debbie phoned and is asking several of us women teachers who lead if we would like to hire Brigitta for a private workshop..."

"On what exactly?" I asked.

"To talk to us about the founding of Tango Mujer."

I stood intrigued. I had previously mounted several all-female tango-modern fusion pieces in my graduate school dance concert and a few other contexts. I had long admired Rebecca Shulman, and *Tango Mujer* fascinated me from afar.

On what would become a life-changing afternoon, Debbie, Christy, Pier, Michelle and I joined Brigitta for three hours of divine play and nuts-and-bolts practicality. She got us moving in lead-follow games as pairs and as a pack, traversing a small studio in an amorphous blob of *ochos* and *amagues*. Then she mentored us on how to start a dance company. Last, she gifted us with a stage shot of herself and Rebecca – in barefoot *gancho* abandon – on the cover of Germany's *Tango Danza* magazine.

Motivated and curious, we were also overcommitted women wary of taking on one more thing. Nonetheless, post-Brigitta, we began meeting weekly in my home studio in San Francisco to explore this new tango terrain. One day Pier volleyed, "What if we experiment around the theme of the embrace – of what it is to take a partner in your arms?" Riding that wave, we led, followed, and laughed our way through many an afternoon.

2 minutes – We can do that!

"Hey, look," I told the girls one such Tuesday. "ODC Theater is seeking submissions for *24 Views: A Snapshot of Bay Area Dance*. They want 2-minute pieces from San Francisco choreographers." "Two minutes," we collectively thought. "We should be able to do that!"

The *24 Views* deadline catalyzed our transition from casual exploratory group to professional dance company. For starters, to apply we needed a company name and audition video! The name Tango Con*Fusión (Tango With Fusion/Tango Confusion) met three needs: to explain our integration of other dance genres with Argentine Tango, to reach speakers of English and Spanish, and to poke fun at ourselves. By pooling footage from our respective 'pre-Brigitta' all-female tango performance work (some of which involved each other) into a montage deftly edited by Debbie's husband, John Campbell, we appeared to have been together as a company for some time. We were accepted into *24 Views* and got cracking to Astor Piazzolla.

While our 2-minute embrace-themed piece was a coup for us, it scored only this dim glimmer of hope from a San Francisco dance critic: "Who knows what they'll do in a couple of years?" My demeanor sank. How deflating! But my cohorts proved a tougher, more resilient lot. "Who knows *what they'll do* in a couple of years?" Debbie chirped, alchemizing doom into optimism.

Shoes for feet in a new place

As we sorted out *what exactly* we'd do *in the interim*, Daniel Trenner paid us a visit. Amidst more contact improv-inspired games, he drew our attention to our feet. We had settled on the wearing of LaDucas, the Broadway dancer's character shoe of choice. Their chunky 2" heel trumped a tango stiletto's stability for our lead-follow fusion work. "You should really consider *not* wearing heels. They are inhibiting what you can do," Daniel observed. "And," he cautioned us on his way out the door, "Do not fall into the trap of just trying to imitate men." Weighing his counsel, we discovered that ideal dance shoes do not yet exist for feet at the fusion forefront. No wonder Brigitta and Rebecca were barefoot in that *Tango Danza* photo! We resorted to wearing Pedinis, the ballet teacher shoes, for their pliability, minimal heel, and tango-esque T-strap. They remain our go-to shoes.

Auriel in the corner

Auriel, who would become a key figure in the SF Queer Tango Community, shadowed us

during our first year and created *Tango Con*Fusión: The Documentary*. We got so used to having her stationed with her videocamera in the corner of the studio that upon leaving we sometimes forgot to bid her goodbye.

HIGHLIGHTS & MILESTONES

December 2006 – Leading Ladies of Tango at the Herbst Theater/ SAN FRANCISCO Producer Ted Viviani, Artistic Director Allyson Manta, Music Director Polly Ferman.

As part of an international cast of 22 female tango artists (dancers, musicians and singer Silvana Deluigi) we had a special opportunity to share the stage with Tango Mujer in this groundbreaking show celebrating women in tango.

December 2008 – International Queer Tango Festival/ BUENOS AIRES

In 2007 and 2008 Mariana Docampo, Augusto Balizano & Roxana Gargano, the directors of the International Queer Tango Festival of Buenos Aires, specifically invited Tango Con*Fusión to serve as role models to aspiring female leaders in Argentina. In 2008 Tango Con*Fusión was honored to accept the second invitation to perform and host a San Francisco-Theme *Práctica* at the Festival. In addition, Christy and I were invited to teach in the official Festival line-up.

Mariana Docampo explained that the event had two sides. On the one hand, it addressed tango within the LGBT community; on the other, it addressed the still controversial idea of women partnering women in tango. Virtually non-existent in the mainstream tango scene in Buenos Aires, such partnering was, to a palpable degree, even taboo in the eyes of many gay porteños! By contrast, Europe and the US had been somewhat more hospitable hosts to women partnering women.

Falcón noted that foreigners regularly flock to Buenos Aires to study tango at the source. Within the same-sex tango community in Buenos Aires, she advocated a 'reverse-flow' – that is, Argentines looking abroad, especially to Europe and the States – for insights on partnering less rigidly defined by gender. In this context, Tango Con*Fusión viewed the invitation as a potent opportunity to open minds and shape history.

We performed *Embrace*, our signature 10-minute piece (sprouted from our *24 Views* debut), at the famous traditional milonga *Confitería Ideal*.

April 2009 – GlamourTango/ CHICAGO

Polly Ferman's intimate all-female spinoff of *Leading Ladies* took to the stage of Logan Square Auditorium. We were honored to choreograph and perform to original music by Daniel Binelli.

Summer 2009, 2010, 2011 - International Queer Tango Festivals/ SAN FRANCISCO

Tango Con*Fusión was delighted to teach lead-follow exchange and perform in these festivals in our home city. Drawing together tangueros from Argentina, Europe and the US, Debbie directed a sold-out show for IQTF/SF at San Francisco's counterculture hot spot, Cellspace.

March 2010 – CONGRESO INTERNACIONAL DE TANGO ARGENTINO (CITA)/ BUENOS AIRES

Tango Con*Fusión was the first all-female tango company to perform at CITA. We presented *Embrace* and *Tanguera* at the milonga *Niño Bien*. In addition, Christy and I were the first all-female pair, and the first American pair, to teach (and to present Lead-Follow Exchange as a topic) at CITA.

QUEER TANGO MARATHON/ BUENOS AIRES

We performed two pieces – *Reflections* and *Tanguera* – at Mariano Garcés' inaugural marathon.

March 2011 – TANGHETTO/ Sala Zitarrosa MONTEVIDEO & Salón Canning BUENOS AIRES

Latin Grammy-nominated electrotango band Tanghetto invited us to choreograph to three songs from their CD *Más allá del sur* and join them in performance on their tour to Montevideo and at the iconic Buenos Aires milonga Salón Canning.

2011-2013 – A shift in focus

On a temporary hiatus from choreography and performance, we chose to concentrate on the further exploration and analysis of lead-follow, revamping our website (TangoConFusion.com), and documenting our body of work.

LEAVING A LEGACY

Trading Places DVD in celebration of Tango Con*Fusión's 10-year anniversary

Moving forward, we will focus on sharing our lead-follow exchange vocabulary through our new *Trading Places* DVD/Teaching Program – a visual love letter to our city and a sampling of 10 exchanges developed in our time together. We will continue to offer workshops and performances at tango and other dance-related festivals.

March 2014 – CITA & LADY'S TANGO FESTIVAL/ BUENOS AIRES

To this end, Tango Con*Fusión is excited to co-teach lead-follow exchange and perform at Johana Copes' Lady's Tango Festival/Buenos Aires. Tango Con*Fusión will also perform, and Christy and I will co-teach a class on lead-follow exchange for a second time at CITA.

September 2014 – 2nd ANNUAL LADY'S TANGO FESTIVAL/ SAN FRANCISCO

Tango Con*Fusión will teach and perform for a second year at Johana Copes' North American version of her Buenos Aires festival.

Summer 2015 – QUEER TANGO FESTIVAL/ BERLIN

Looking ahead, Astrid Weiske has invited Tango Con*Fusión to Germany.

GRATITUDES

Tango Con*Fusión made the trip from "Who knows what they'll do in a couple of years?" to 10+ years of making work thanks to many who have believed in us. The partial list would include: Brigitta Winkler; Daniel Trenner; Auriel and Winter, Mariana Docampo, Augusto Balizano, Milonga La Marsháll and the Queer Tango communities in Buenos Aires and SF; Mariano Garcés; Pedro "El Indio" Benavente; Ted Viviani; Polly Ferman; Ana Rossell; Mara Avila; Fabian Salas; Max Masri and Tanghetto; Lee Battershell; Andrea, Cheryl and Steven Kochenderfer; John Campbell, Daniel Peters, Peter Ivory; Russ and Kathie Eng; Joan Cote; Carlos Bais; our sponsor, Alma Del Tango; our own dance teachers and mentors; our families, friends, students and supporters. Thank you from the bottom of our hearts – and our well-worn Pedinis!

IMPACT ON THE MAINSTREAM TANGO WORLD: FURTHERING THE FORM

Women have been continually marginalized in tango. Expected to follow rather than lead, they have been exiled, in effect, from equal partnership.

Tango traditionalists tend to hold a narrow view of what constitutes 'true' tango music and dance. This protective stance does help to keep the essence of tango intact. Yet it inhibits tango's growth beyond a musical signature that was set in the 1940s, and a dance partnership model that is strictly male-led and heterosexual in nature. So... How may that truth be re-defined? By whom? And where?

Our aesthetic is unique. Neither pure Argentine tango nor modern dance, our work is on the tango-fusion fringe. We do not merely imitate men. We dance *as women who lead*. We explore the creative switching of lead and follow roles. This egalitarian alternative to the traditional model of 'male leader/female follower' portends a cultural shift of power within tango and catalyzes evolution of the art.

Cristiano Bramani and Andrea Cesarini – Photographs

© Laura Valentino

Photographer Laura Valentino has documented several Queer Tango festivals. The photos of Italian Queer Tango dancers Cristiano Bramani and Andrea Cesarini (below) were taken at the International Queer Tango Festival 2012 in Stockholm, organised by Charlotte Rivero, Tangoverkstan - Roles in motion.



© Laura Valentino



© *Laura Valentino*



© *Laura Valentino*



© *Laura Valentino*

An Interview with Claudio Gonzalez: the experiences and insights of a professional Queer Tango dancer

© Olaya Aramo. Translated by Ray Batchelor

Olaya Aramo on behalf of The Queer Tango Book (QTB) and Claudio Gonzalez met in Madrid in early July 2014 during the Gay Pride celebrations.

Claudio Gonzalez is a queer professional dancer with over 25 years' experience. He began learning tango with his parents, professional tango dancers Peter and Nilda González Serna, who taught him to dance when he was 15 years old. Through his parents he met and trained with Antonio Todaro, and through him met Pepito Avellaneda. He also took classes with Mingo Pugliese and his wife, Esther. At that time he began dancing at milongas in Buenos Aires.

Besides tango, Claudio Gonzalez has an extensive background in ballet, contemporary, jazz and as a trapeze artist, all of which he has fused with tango. From his trapeze experiences, for example, he has developed aerial steps in tango. In collaboration with another trapeze artist, he has devised dances where they have integrated tango steps into trapeze performances. He also has a theatrical training. His professional dancing career began at the age of 21. Like other professionals of that time, he travelled to Japan to do a show with D'Arienzo soloists, directed by Carlos Lazzari, with orchestras led by Walter Rios, Jose Colangelo and Victor Lavallen. He went to Japan about ten times over the years, while continuing his tango studies in Argentina as well as studying other disciplines.

During his early years in tango, he worked with companies such as Tangokinesis run by Ana Maria Stekelman, a company which works with a fusion of tango and contemporary dance; with Forever Tango in the show Tanguera; and he toured with the Italian-Belgian production of Tango for five years. He is currently working on a show with the renowned Belgian-Moroccan choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaou, while at the same time working in the tango show Milonga. One of the pieces in his coming show unpacks the tango embrace with regard to the arms and hands and re-interprets tango movements that are usually made with the feet.

He is on the jury and a trainer at the Tango World Championships. As a coach for the World Championships, he is always trying to do something original. Rather than concentrating on winning, Claudio encourages creativity and originality in the competition pieces which the dancers submit. He coached a couple - two men - for the world tango competitive scene in 2013.

QTB: What is your vision of tango and of Queer Tango?

Claudio: When I started studying with my father, he taught me both roles. My father knew both roles, so nowadays we still perform together from time to time. He is now 71 years old. Given my sexual orientation and my father's teachings, performing with him is an amusing experience. When you study both roles from the beginning, you understand exactly what it feels like to be led (in this case, as if one were a woman with all your senses active to do what the leader wants) and you can use this understanding to inform how you lead.

For me, there is not much difference between Queer Tango and mainstream tango milongas where people dance in male-female couples. I think that the difference is in how you feel. Whether you are following or leading, you feel as a human being, so to me there

is no difference. I don't differentiate between Queer Tango and traditional tango milongas. Now, whether other people disapprove of it (Queer Tango) or don't accept it, that is another matter.

I think Argentina is more open about these things now. My friend, Augusto Balizano, has been organising the Festival Internacional de Tango Queer en Buenos Aires for five or six years or more and every year people become more integrated. People who are not queer are increasingly a part of it. This is a welcome development and we must continue on the path to non-differentiation.

QTB: What is the focus of your teaching in tango?

Claudio: As a master of tango, I teach what I am asked to teach. Two or three people may turn up determined to learn both roles. When a person does not really know one role, and yet wants to learn the other, this is a problem. I think you have to start from scratch with both roles, or you need to learn one role well and then the other. We have structure when we teach, because without some structure, we cannot teach how to improvise – or how to dance spontaneously. There are technical skills which need to be acquired, and these are a little complex. Because I learnt both roles at the same time, I don't find dancing either role difficult, but some of the things I want to do in the role of follower I have to practice a lot, because usually I lead. When I give private lessons to tango couples, with both women and men I always think the teacher has to know both roles and be acquainted at least with the 'other role'. If the classes are with a couple and I am teaching with my partner, each of us focuses on one chosen role.

QTB: What activities have you built up around the Queer Tango movement?

Claudio: I participate when I can. I love doing it, because I think it is important for us to gain space. Although I think that there shouldn't be, there are differences between Queer Tango and the mainstream. The main thing is to create a [Queer Tango] space. Because I have danced for many years now, people recognise me as a teacher and artist and they respect me. From that position, I am able to suggest alternative ideas. If I dance as a follower at traditional milongas, no one says anything, so I like to transgress a little and people respond with affection, really great people who are like my grandparents. Everyone likes and respects what I do. You have to respect the way things are and be sensitive to how people see things. I'm not indiscriminate in what I do: I do what I do from a very professional position, very serious, very healthy, without attacking anyone. I would not kiss a guy in a performance at a traditional milonga because it would cause offence. In this way we are more likely to be accepted.

For some years I have contributed to Queer Tango Festivals in Buenos Aires and in Berlin. Although I say I do things, I'm not that much of an activist. My friend, Augusto, is much more a part of the Queer Tango movement. He rings me up and asks me to help and I always agree. The Queer Tango community have responded positively to this. Doing something professionally, or to do something artistic, is to respect the queer community. It's not okay to go in casual clothes and dance (an unrehearsed performance) because it is at a queer milonga, assuming that people there wouldn't notice. But many people may think like this. If it is not how you would present yourself at a traditional milonga, I don't know why you would want to present yourself differently at a queer milonga? People at queer milongas are much more relaxed, lighter, they are not as experienced in tango, they don't know that much about tango. If they don't know much, they must be encouraged to learn more or be more curious. I believe that presenting things in a very professional way

makes people more interested in tango; from an artistic point of view, from a technical one, they ask: why is tango this way? Why is the embrace the way it is? Why are roles swapped? Why is there apparently a structure, a small one, which you need to understand in tango? Why do the women or the followers wear high heels? ... I think that this is important.

QTB: Can you put the relationship between Queer Tango in Buenos Aires and Queer Tango in Europe into context?

Claudio: We saw the renaissance. In 2001 I left Buenos Aires and did not know if I would return. I had lived in the same house with Augusto for many years, and Augusto began dancing then; he met me, became interested, then I stopped seeing him for a while. His dancing improved a little, we started living together and I taught him tango. He said, "Return soon." I said, "If I don't come back, what you have to do is start a milonga for boys or for girls (to dance with their own gender), a gay milonga. Now is the time to do it." He said, "When you get back we will do it together." I said, "I don't want to get involved in that." Because looking back now, tango then was still very closed to those things, and I would have been closing doors on opportunities for professional development and I did not want to do that. I knew he had another string to his bow: he is a graphic designer. And when I came back, he had already started the milonga, which was his first in that very small apartment. I went. I had a good time, I had fun. I think it was a good start and I continue to support him. It is part of his life and is very important to him. Because of his milonga, he is invited to go abroad and he travels a lot.

I think in Europe queer people dance tango better than in Buenos Aires. They are diligent, they apply themselves, the women lead very well. I think this is a lesson to us. I don't know why, but because we live in Argentina, and because Argentinian tango is Argentinian, we get lazy. And because of that we just boast that the tango is ours, but once we go abroad then we realise that they know a bit more than us. In Europe I have danced with women who have led me and it really was a pleasure.

QTB: You are working with Augusto on performances?

Claudio: Augusto and I like to work together. We had a group, 'Proposal 5', where we were four boys and a girl and we would change roles all the time. And after we disbanded, invitations started coming in to participate as teachers at some of the festivals. I have my own work running in parallel to the queer work, so sometimes I can participate, and sometimes I can't. Preparing a piece for a queer audience is very different. Queer thinking is very different, because it is much more open-minded, because you know people are going to accept things in a way that those who are more involved with traditional tango and more closed will not. Although my work has always been a fusion and I make many different tango propositions, with 'queer', with Augusto, we have done many different things, from dancing in skirts to dancing in high heels - and that at a time when there were still no videos of guys dancing modern tango in high heels. We made a couple of choreographed pieces that had to do with 'The Disappeared'. We danced with our heads covered, obliging people to think why they could not see our faces. We had great fun working with and doing performances for queer people. We know it's more relaxed and our work is very well received. The first time we went to Berlin, we danced to a song in German. It was modern music, the singer was Mina, and it had a milonga rhythm and was very good. And then we have prepared various performances that had more to do with contemporary dance, leaving tango a little and going off in other directions. But provided you keep true to the essence of tango you can put any step into a dance and it is still tango.

QTB: What do you mean by 'essence'?

Claudio: The essence? Let's say you study one step in tango. It is the sense of knowing how to step, how to walk, when you have a clear idea of what tango really is - I think this has a lot to do with what I am telling you. It has to do with what's happening to you in your skin, in the pores of your skin, that is what I mean. We work a lot with modern dance, and if we use the same choreography as with a tango but with another structure and modern movement we make another thing, but it still adheres to the spirit of tango and applies the technique of leading as in traditional tango. For example: Pugliese; Di Sarli; Troilo; Piazzola. One must know how to maintain the essence in a choreographed performance. Sometimes you succeed and sometimes you don't.

I think there is only one tango. You can work on it and you can analyse it through investigation, with the changing of the roles and changes to the embrace. You can do a lot of work like that, but that's just the sort of work I did with choreographers, that's one way to investigate. The thing is that people in Queer Tango are willing to try, and in traditional tango they aren't. They would never change the embrace, so that for them, ours is a wonderful contribution. It seems to me that it's part of an investigation, and because we are a little more open-minded and play with roles, perhaps, something new may appear, hopefully a special, Queer Tango teaching technique. For me at the moment this is a kind of research, we do and other people do, like with tango nuevo, which is more relaxed, more fluid, with more listening to the leader, more agency on the part of the person who is led ... and this is good. All proposals are welcome.

I would add that beyond all the techniques, all the forms, the queer, the traditional, the modern, it seems to me that although we break the embrace, it is a dance of the embrace. It is a dance for two. It is essentially a dance of communication: to communicate what happens to you, such that those dancing feel what is transmitted, listen to the music and listen to their partner, and each dances with the other. For me, essentially, this is what we must never forget. Beyond changes in roles and in the proposals and responses, one must remember that one person, alone, cannot dance tango.

Con Artist: paintings

© Con Artist



Teetering Tango. © Con Artist



Take Her To The Cross. © Con Artist



Tangueros Dallying In The Alleyway. © Con Artist

A Glimpse Into The Life Of A Queer Tango Addict

© Con Artist

It's 2008... I meet Nelson Ávila, the Argentine tango legend and Madalyn in an Argentine Café on Long Island, New York, called Café Buenos Aires. They perform... I am captivated and ask if I can take lessons. I want to lead, I tell him. He says that's fine and tells me that a female leader, Lexa Roséan, just won a NY Tango Championship with Gayle Gibbons Madeira. Nelson happened to be one of the judges. After studying with Nelson for a year I ventured into NYC to seek out Lexa. I found that she had organized a lesbian milonga in NYC at the RUBYFRUIT BAR & GRILL. She was now hosting the Milonga del Cielo in midtown. I studied with Lexa, privately and attended her milongas, which were all inclusive and very gay friendly. She was the first to show me how to change roles smoothly while dancing. I was able to have two art shows there. Along with my varied subject matter in art, I began doing allegorical tango paintings. I was now a tango addict.

Tango has been evolving since its inception. The definitions of queer and gay have also been evolving. In the beginning of tango, men would practice together... They may or may not have been homosexual. Today more women are learning to lead and follow. Many followers are learning to lead for many reasons... one of which is not to wait to be asked to dance, but to take the lead, asking someone to tango and using the cabeceo.

Tango is such an improvisational dance... More so than any other; the communication is a necessary constant, whether back leading or changing roles. Queer Tango today is for everyone. Many heterosexual tango dancers feel more comfortable going to a queer tango event to learn and feel free to dance with their same sex. It is an absolute that you become a better tango dancer when you can dance both roles. It's very important for teachers to be able to teach both roles... even if they are a couple.

However, many heterosexuals will never feel comfortable around the word 'Queer'... afraid that they might be considered homosexual. Much of the current thinking does not want to be labeled and our youth is more open-minded about testing the waters of their own sexuality. Even to consider bisexuality as a norm. Many do not want to be labeled 'male' or 'female' either! But what group is expanding the minds of people through tango? My vote goes to Queer Tango! Some of the tango teachers, I have studied with who are gay, do not focus on the separation of queer or straight patrons, as open role is for everyone and one of the evolutions of tango.

I was a part of the 1st New York City Queer Tango Festival in 2010 that Sergio Segura produced, showing my art. NY is actually not a big queer tango hub... There are more private milongas for queers that are open to everyone. I worked with Sergio's group, Rainbow Tango NYC, trying to promote another NYC Queer Tango Festival, but have not been able to get it off the ground as yet. NYC is more inclusive of gay and straight tango. Walter Perez, Leonardo Sardella, Jack Hanley, Nicholas Chui and Meg Farrell, to name a few NYC open role tango pioneers.

In 2011 I ventured to Buenos Aires for the Queer Tango Festival. A wonderful learning and cultural experience that bonded me with many a tango addict.

I am a natural performer and could not wait to perform Argentine tango. I worked with Sergio Segura choreographing my first performance. With his tango technique and my dramatic ideas we collaborated on a piece titled 'Sultry Remorse'. In this piece I had the

idea to include some lesbian drama. A bit of kinky passion that goes sour and remorse that is unforgiven.

I have fused tango with Japanese butoh dancing, collaborating with Robyn Bellospirito. We did a performance at Webster Hall in NYC, titled 'Tabu'. How this fusion came about was through dancing together, focusing on my tango moves and her butoh moves. We then chose two pieces of music. One was a tango and the other was actually an opera. Robyn was able to mix them together. We included in our dancing a push and pull. Ultimately, the story line embraced Madame Butterfly, wherein Robyn does a graceful and passionate death scene.

Another tango butoh fusion with Robyn was titled 'Reverie'. With this piece, Robyn and I heard the music and both saw a similar story line. We were both from another time and space, but come together to tango through our sweet memories of each other. When I place my fedora upon my head, I magically go back in time. I used a window prop to symbolize the different dimensions. We, however, must return to reality in the end.

Another tango I did with Robyn was 'La Vie en rose' by Édith Piaf. I did this as Clownie, a dapper happy clown, who safety-pins his polka dots onto his overcoat.

I also fused tango with burlesque in collaboration with the burlesque dancer, Bianca Dagga, titled 'I've Seen That Face Before' by Grace Jones. With Bianca's tasteful tease, I was able to combine tango with gingerly removing her clothing. In the end I gentlywomanly cover her up.

I love creating dramatic tangos that tell a story as in 'Jealous Tango' with Nan Min. With the cooperation of a few lovely lady extras, I created a lot of flirting, pleading and triumph. I used her gloves to include a bit of bondage around her wrist and waist. It doesn't take much to add a special touch. Sometimes performances start with music, other times it might be an idea, costumes, scenery, props, but always with the passion that Argentine tango creates inside of me.

Queer Tango has given me confidence and community. Queer Tango has inspired me to embrace my 'tanguero' within... It is because of Queer Tango, I cut my hair short and donned a suit... Thank you, Queer Tango!

Notes

Performances by Con Artist:

Sultry Remorse - <http://youtu.be/pOdwDU4-hog>

Tabu - <http://youtu.be/NrpaFTfJzh4>

Reverie - http://youtu.be/C_KDcdPC4b4

La Vie En Rose - <http://youtu.be/EHpakVBD0JQ>

Tango/Burlesque: *I've Seen That Face Before* by Grace Jones -

<http://youtu.be/uGqBrefyAM>

Jealous Tango - <http://youtu.be/U0IUCyiL5B0>



Tango Fem. Courtesy of Tango Fem

Tango Fem Creating Gender Trouble in Rome

© Mila Morandi and Giulia Cerulli

At Linguaggi del Corpo-Altrogenere or as Tango Fem, we are involved in research and teaching. We organise events about women's issues and gender identity, and address the social aspects through artistic languages, and the practice of social theatre. Our experimentation with the exchange of roles in Tango began in early 2000 as part of the training in art therapy techniques and dance theatre projects, and physical theatre projects for psychiatric patients, and we organised the first tango classes with the exchange of roles in this context too. Research projects in the field of queer and Queer Tango classes started about 2005 and approximately at that time the group Tango Fem was founded. We have been investigating the queer dimensions of tango, through a range of performative body languages, starting with our early work on the female role. Tango Fem is a women-only group. It has begun an experimental dance process that involves women leading, following, and exchanging roles in tango (*intercambio*), and dancing contact tango. Our contact tango activities are in collaboration with the Casa Internazionale delle Donne (the International House of Women) in Rome. We organize workshops in dance theatre, social theatre and Queer Tango with the theatre students of a Master's degree programme at the Sapienza college of the University of Rome. Tango Fem has also initiated and coordinated theatre dance events in collaboration with Rome's new music park, the Auditorium Parco della Musica, as well as the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, the Maxxi Museum, and Genderotica 2013, a bi-annual queer feminist arts festival. At Genderotica 2013[1] we created performative installations at the Teatro Valle Occupato in Rome in collaboration with Eyes Wild Drag, a queer drag group practicing gender queer performance.

Our Philosophy

We see learning to swap from leading to following within a dance as both a practical and a symbolic response to the polarization implicit in conventional tango relationships. In this way, tango may disarticulate that polarity through the continuous transformation of the embrace in the exchange of roles - a dynamic flow which transforms, inverts and promotes the deconstruction of stereotypes and fixed identities and articulates alternatives. The encounters between our tango students and groups of dancers and performers have inspired our first 'games' and performative work.

Installation/Performance 'TANGO Fem: a dialogue of bodies'

Two women are exchanging roles, and we see that they are transformed by the dance: 'feminine' or 'masculine' by turns, going through various temporary gender 'shades' in a 'Game of Tango', which allows each dancer to migrate in a queer way along a scale of potential gender identities and thus create a 'dynamic gender contamination' of the performance space.

The SOVVERTANGO Project

The SOVVERTANGO emerged from our collaboration with Eyes Wild Drag[2] during the GendErotica 2013. In January 2014, a new experiment in subversion will take place at LiberaMilonga at the Teatro Valle Occupato in Rome!

Rules, languages, identities, roles and relationships... In our work, tango, the embodiment of the rigid structure of a heterosexual relationship, becomes an exercise in reinventing relationships by using the dynamics of exposing the participants to gender drag. The innovative aspect of this experiment is our Eyes Wild Drag 'Style Station' at the milonga, a place offering accessories, clothes, and make up for the tango dancers. Anyone who wants to, can become a drag king, a drag queen or may experiment with any of a

multiplicity of shades of gender identities, and re-enter the tango embrace embodying that change; *intercambio* then turns the relationship of the tango couple into a still more fluid construction.

In the Queer Tango workshops we renegotiate gender relationships through the body. The traditional tango generally establishes a defined relationship between the bodies of the tango couple: one has the role of 'male' and leads the dance (how to interpret the music, which style the couple is to dance, etc.); the other, who has the role of 'female'/'follower' relies completely on the leader, and becomes the receiver and the executor of a command. But there are more ways to dance a tango. It is not enough just to swap 'active' and 'passive' roles. The aim of our research is to challenge these gender roles, and to move towards a combination of equal roles or the free choice of roles regardless of the conventional norms.

Our group is presently working with BallorOmO Roma and Tango-queer Roma[3], co-organizing a series of meetings, courses, and milongas which are open to everybody regardless of gender and sexual preferences.

The Body Politic

Where we go and how we move our bodies has meanings. The body is political. It is not just a physical body. Our movements in space and time are in part determined by our history, our personal experience, the society in which we live, and by our gender and sexuality. And as we all have internalised rules, roles, and relationships in our bodies, it is obvious to us that we can de-construct them by starting with our own bodies. It is a political gesture because it will make LGBTQ people visible, especially in Italy, where there are no LGBTQ rights. It's like we do not exist. Queer Tango is a great tool, as it exposes people to the many variables of gender; you can either choose your favourite role or change your choice several times...

We dance at traditional milongas, making ourselves visible and queering the spaces normally dedicated to heterosexual conventions.

Notes

1 Genderotica is organized by Eyes Wild Drag, Rome, Italy.

2 Eyes Wild Drag - <http://eyeswilddrag.wix.com/eyeswilddrag>

3 BallorOmO Roma - <http://balloromoroma.blogspot.com> and

Tango-queer Roma at facebook - <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Tango-Queer-Roma/789042834490842>

5. Changing the World

Queer Tango as a form of struggling with patriarchal norms – notes on Queer Tango in Russia

© Natalia Merkulova

Most of the material used in this essay was gathered for the Conference 'On the Crossroads: Methodology, theory and practice of LGBT and Queer Studies' that took place in St Petersburg in October 2013.

Due to the mainstream notion on gender order in Russia, tango remains here a symbol of love and passion between a man and a woman, a way of realizing one's femininity or masculinity in other words, another way of sustaining the traditional heteronormative discourse.

It is important to note that on many Internet websites advertising tango classes in Russia one of the ultimate selling points to start dancing is to show one's 'true femininity' or become a 'real man'; and for women to understand how to become a 'real woman' by learning to listen to one's partner, become more attentive and obedient. Here are some quote from Russian tango websites:

"After becoming strong, independent, even self-sufficient and successful a woman keeps expecting real masculine behaviour, care, and courtship from a man. She keeps waiting for a real man. (...) Argentinean tango is one of the ways for men to feel like a Man and for women to feel a Woman." [1]

"Argentinean tango is a silent conversation between a strong man and a real woman." [2]

"The ability to dance Argentinean tango will help every woman to feel like a real woman (graceful, light, seductive, and intriguing). The ability to dance Argentinean tango will help every man to feel a real man (confident, determined and persistent)." [3]

The situation with the development of Queer Tango in Russia is still very complicated. It started almost 4 years ago in St Petersburg and has now (2014) grown to three medium-sized schools in St Petersburg and a big one in Moscow. There have been lots of changes, difficulties and conflicts during this period, but what we have learnt for sure is that a huge part of the traditional tango community is still not very eager to accept and welcome Queer Tango dancers. A few years ago there was a scandal concerning several same-sex couples on the dance floor. It triggered a heated discussion on the Internet, where a huge number of people claimed that tango should only be for men and women, that same-sex couples contorted the whole idea of this dance, etc.. It was hard for us even to read these comments, so full were they of anger, aggression and hatred. They definitely showed the fears and concerns of traditional tangueros, their complete rejection of the possibility of same-sex partner tango dancing. Although this conflict passed almost at once and there were a lot of dancers and teachers who spoke out against the exclusion of queer tangueros from the mainstream tango events, it flamed up again last autumn in the mainstream and the LGBT tango community. We all know the mechanisms of homophobia and hatred: rejection of the 'other', but it is clear that, with a wider cultural and political climate in which ideas of traditional family virtues, religious feelings and overall conventionalism are increasingly favoured, Queer Tango will hardly be welcomed on traditional dance floors.

On the other hand, I can see more and more people from different spheres and with different dancing experiences getting interested in learning different roles in tango, and teachers ready to instruct queer tangueros in more tolerant schools. According to my own research, there are some men learning the follower's part and women ready to dance with female partners as well as learning to lead themselves.

However, as a feminist myself I'm not only interested in the development of Queer Tango as a comfortable area for queer people, but also in attracting unconventional straight dancers who can both increase the level of dancing and support Queer Tango as an alternative on the mainstream dance floors.

Why do I find Queer Tango important to overcome patriarchal views? To my mind, there are several reasons why it is Queer Tango that can become an efficient tool to attack gender conventionalism and increase gender consciousness.

First of all, within the normative gender order the concept of power and domination appears. Tango in its traditional form is an obvious illustration of control and submission relationship: a leader (generally, it's a man) constructs the dance and creates it via a follower who obeys and conforms to what the leader offers. The idea of a 'true' feminine nature that is submissive and obedient is still quite popular in Russia, as various surveys show such stereotypes are incorporated in all mass culture around us. Therefore, the idea of an open role tango is crucial – as through exchanging roles the power is displaced beyond the binarity and is distributed around the margins, so as to keep the rules and codes of the dance, where the dancers have to follow them for the sake of the dance itself, without following predetermined gender norms and patterns of behaviour.

It is important to understand the subversive nature of Queer Tango, as it breaks with the patriarchal system, attacking its main principle of control and domination. Hence, in my opinion, one of the most significant things about Queer Tango (and the thing which makes it so precious) is the practice of changing roles: it gives both partners an opportunity to rule their common tango body, to 'speak' with the help of music as well as 'listen' to the partner, regardless of their gender.

I am happy to see that, now, both in St Petersburg and in Moscow, the heads of Queer Tango schools provide this opportunity for the individual to choose the role that they want, or encourage them to learn both.

As for the mainstream milongas, it is still quite rare to see a woman leading or a man following there. As I found out during my research, women are more flexible and appear to be ready to dance with a female partner, while many male dancers still perceive tango in terms of eroticism and sexual attraction and consequently find it unacceptable to dance with a same-sex partner. It is interesting to note that male dancers associate the leading role with masculinity, determination and responsibility (a typical set of macho values); while describing the follower's role, they use such terms as gentleness, grace, sensitivity, trust; so it becomes clearer why they reject the following role – by doing this they symbolically lose their masculinity, become more feminine and gentle. That cannot be consistent with the ideal of the 'true' man. It is also curious that teachers are considered to be immune to some of these norms concerning their behaviour and choice of partners. It is quite common to see a female teacher leading at traditional milongas and it is approved and widely accepted; there are also a few men dancing with each other, but they are either teachers themselves or life-long dancers which puts them almost in the same category. It is known that quite a lot of women learn to lead, but they never do it socially on the dance

floor, as it is not approved of. They say, you have to dance perfectly to lead, if you are a woman, though by contrast, male beginners receive support and understanding.

In Queer Tango schools, people are gradually becoming more and more interested in learning both parts. At both Moscow and St Petersburg schools there are now straight followers and leaders who come to learn the opposite role and experience something new.

I also think it is important to integrate Queer Tango into the traditional tango community to show in the wider world alternative ways of dancing, to break the strict traditionalism that keeps both women and men within strict limits that hamper them from fully enjoying the great diversity of this magical dance.

What are the objectives, perspectives and achievements of Queer Tango[4] in Russia?

As noted, for almost four years, Queer Tango has been developing in Russia. It started in a small studio in St Petersburg founded by Anastasia Tiskina with a milonga in her own home (following the pattern of rock concerts in private flats popular in the 1990s) and only a handful of couples on the dance floor. Soon after this their friend from Moscow, Yury Panov, organized his own studio Qtango that continues to grow and develop. Last year they ran a small Queer Tango festival that included seminars with Russian teachers such as Alexandra Vilvovskaya, Viacheslav Ivanov and Olga Leonova, Elena Argona, Nana Khocholava. Later, in the summer of 2013, they hosted seminars taught by Augusto Balizano, the internationally famous queer tanguero and teacher from Buenos Aires. The head of Queer Tango Moscow, Yury Panov, has just started to teach tango to deaf people. It turned out to be an amazing and inspiring experiment. In St Petersburg there are 3 schools: the Queer Tango school, Salida, headed by Otar Bagaturiya and Yana Khalilova; Queer Dance Club, headed by Marina Stepanova; and Open Role Tango Studio, headed by Sasha Trofimova. Each school organises different types of event: regular practicas and milongas in public areas open for all dancers; costume milongas and open-air events; joint seminars; and milongas organized in other places than Moscow and St Petersburg.

We are hoping to establish contacts and friendly relationship with Queer tangeros in other countries, that is why we are planning to participate in international festivals and tango events.

Today, when the reinforcement of totalitarian rule and power, narrow-minded traditionalism and xenophobia are rife, it is extremely important to continue to dance and share this magnificent experience with creative and flexible people no matter what gender or sexual orientation they are.

Notes

1 http://www.totango.ru/doc/doc_54.php. The quote is translated by Natalia Merkulova.

2 <http://kv2.com.ua/argentinskoe-tango>. The quote is translated by Natalia Merkulova.

3 <http://paratodos.ru/sila-tango/argentinskoe-tango-krasivyy-i-unikalnyj-sposob-razvitiya-cheloveka.html>. The quote is translated by Natalia Merkulova.

4 Qtango in Moscow's website: <http://qtango.ru/>

Queer Tango Dancers in Russia – Portfolio

© Alice Heigh

Photographer Alice Heigh has documented Queer Tango social dancers at the Open Role Milonga, Clever Club, St Petersburg, Russia.



Yana Khalilova and Otar Bagaturiya, the teachers of Queer Tango studio Salida in St Petersburg at the Open Role Milonga, Clever Club. © Alice Heigh



© Alice Heigh



© Alice Heigh



© Alice Heigh

Queer Tango as Tool for Change: a case for the sharing of insights with others

© Ray Batchelor

What use is Queer Tango? This is, of course, a foolish question. Queer Tango, like tango or any similar activity, need not in any practical sense be useful, even if it brings benefits with it that may be of use. It is, for the most part, danced for its own sake and not as a route to something else. Why should it be useful? But if it can be shown that it is, useful to whom? Elsewhere, I have written about the relationship of Queer Tango to the mainstream, as it looks from where I dance. I argue that there are qualities inherent in Queer Tango which render it attractive and of value to dancers in the mainstream. Here I go further. A sequence of accidental meetings led me to engage in two small Queer Tango research projects and I have now embarked on a third. The first gave me license to turn my attention away from dancers looking to dance, towards non-dancers who manage other people. This was based on the proposition that if they danced Queer Tango they could become better managers. The second is an attempt to push the doors of the Queer Tango milonga open a little wider, so that a group normally excluded from tango – deaf people – might join us. The third – now being developed through pilot workshops – offers a practical means of combatting homophobia in football. All three enable me to ask, and to some extent answer the question, is there something special about Queer Tango, such that to dance it may have unexpected value both on and beyond the dance floor? I make a start in exploring that here.

An Accidental Encounter over Coffee

Spring, 2011. One morning, I am at work (a small university near London), in the student refectory looking for somewhere to sit and drink my coffee. I join a table of my friends, who – because the first class of the day is shortly to start – are obliged almost immediately to get up and leave. I am not teaching the first class and find myself alone with someone quite unknown to me. Polite, agreeable exchanges ensue: she teaches on management courses at quite a high level; I teach the history and theory of design to design students; I am interested in how we teach and try to improve it; she has lived in the Middle East; I dance tango. “Tango? Now that’s interesting! I have been using tango on my management courses as an analogy for good leadership for several years.” Of course, I understood the power of the analogy at once. Leadership, she told me, has more recently been joined in management studies by the concept of ‘followership’, its inevitable, and largely ignored corollary. Plainly, she was already speaking my language. I cannot now be certain which of us introduced the idea of developing this further, taking it from the conceptual to the practical, but by the close of our conversation two things were quite clear: Julie Burge and I liked one another and made each other laugh; and I would teach the basics of tango to a group of middle managers on a leadership degree. Some days later, Lionel Cox, a colleague of Julie’s and someone I already knew and liked, joined us in the enterprise. Lionel is the only criminologist I know who is also both an expert motorcyclist and a fully qualified clown. His use of rubber chickens and beach balls in the lecture theatre is legend. Among Lionel’s specialisms is ‘Fuzzy Logic’ – the logic which respects and acknowledges how relationships between people actually operate, rather than how they ‘ought’ – another immediate parallel with couples dancing tango. Both Julie and Lionel were eager to dance. Between us, we had three contrasting but complementary sets of interests and expertise to bring to the undertaking. As far as we knew, this was a first. No one had attempted this before.

But 'Queer Tango'? I insisted from the first that we would run the workshop on Queer Tango lines. After all, the managers might all be men or all women, or an even or an

uneven mix of women and men. In considering how managers and the managed interact, there is, inevitably, a gender dimension: of women being managed by men; of men being managed by women; women by women; men by men; and so on through all the various permutations. It would have been absurd to ignore this dynamic or – as would have been the case had we simply adopted ‘tango’ rather than ‘Queer Tango’ – not exploit the couple combinations, which Queer Tango not only sanctions, but celebrates. Above all, I did not want to run a tango workshop in this context, if a particular role on the dance floor might be thought a foregone conclusion based on the gender of the person stepping onto it.

In the event, all the participants were, indeed, women. So in this respect, a Queer Tango scenario more closely mimicked the gender-blind aspirations, if not the professional working realities of those taking part. They had been asked to bring particular types of shoes with them, but not told why. On the day itself, after Lionel’s Fuzzy Logic presentation, Julie only let them know that they would be dancing immediately before the workshop. At the workshop, following a short account of the history of tango and the origins and principles of Queer Tango, I gave a simple beginners class: walking; walking in couples using the practice hold; maintaining the line of dance as if ‘dance is society’, with each dancer having responsibilities to everyone else in the room; musicality, and so on. Eventually, we moved from the practice hold to a dance embrace.

There is, provided one is open to it, a magnificent transparency to the tango embrace. Through it, we cannot help but reveal ourselves to one another. I made suggestions as to how one might offer the embrace. It should not be casual or thoughtless, but an offer of engagement, which is met and responded to equally thoughtfully. The manner in which the embrace is accepted is, itself, telling. Even before the first steps are taken, as we embrace, we learn something fundamental of who we are with, and also of what, at that precise moment, that person is like. Taken together, these inherent personal characteristics plus contingencies of mood are inevitably and largely unconsciously expressed both as an ‘attitude’ of mind and correspondingly of body. And just as your partner perceives that attitude through their own body, you perceive theirs through yours. As a consequence, after a few steps, each has a sense of how this engagement might play out. Tango dancers, rightly, stress the importance of ‘connection’, if each couple is fully to realise their dance.

After the workshop, we had a discussion and Julie invited the participants to write down their reflections on their experiences on the dance floor. Was the workshop a success? Yes. The participants could not only see the connections, they also found that the physical dimension of it stimulated reflections on the nature of good leadership and, indeed, followership. And even these participants - all complete novices - noticed how different couplings led to different kinds of connection, with different kinds of results, each of which were more or less satisfying. Eventually in 2013, an account of our work, in which we argued that a manager is not a position at all but a role enacted with others in time, appeared as a chapter in *The Embodiment of Leadership* - a title which should be good for sales, but conforms to the dubious convention of ignoring followership entirely. I have since run further, successful Queer Tango-Leadership/Followership Workshops in the university and after an invitation arranged by Stephanie Godderidge, in December 2014, ran my first in a commercial context with managers from Électricité de France (EDF), the French energy company.

Another Accidental Encounter over Coffee

Winter, 2012. I had delivered a seminar for other academics reporting on my Queer Tango research work: dancing; teaching dancing; lecturing on the history and theory of tango and Queer Tango plus the leadership/followership project. A few days later over coffee, I found myself talking about all of this to my colleague, Melanie Parris. Melanie and I go back some way. A few years earlier, I had been championing the informal use of videos in teaching. In an age when everyone can make videos, everyone who teaches should, and use them as another tool in their teaching toolbox. Melanie is profoundly deaf and has a hearing dog for the deaf called Aqua. She rounded on me: "Videos are not much use to deaf students, are they?" And she was right. A month or two of trying to create video clips with subtitles followed, as did a pleasant acquaintanceship. Melanie had known about my seminar, but did not attend. She can really only follow proceedings if there is someone doing a simultaneous transcription on a computer screen visible to her, and these take organising and funding. Still, she wanted to know what I had been doing, and I gave her a brief summary. "I'd like to learn tango," she said. We chatted on. Maybe other deaf people might like to learn tango as well? Maybe, we should push this, and see how far we could go?

So we did. We had an exploratory class in a part of the university untouched since 1966, empty and due to be refurbished, but with smooth linoleum flooring and sunlight streaming in. Could I teach her anything of any value in a couple of hours? We experimented. The first problem was discouraging Aqua from joining in, but hearing dogs are well-trained and eventually she sat patiently, if a little resentfully, on her blanket. In fact, it worked out quite well. It was not the dancing of experienced dancers and it was not fancy, but it was musical, and it was tango and – so Melanie told me – it was meaningful. She had adjusted her hearing aid to pick up music, but not much was coming through. The best account of the music came to her through my body.

So we set up a research project, *D/deaf CAN Dance!*, designed to find out if this means of accessing music and musicality might work for other deaf people. And in doing so, whether we might be able to find a way into mainstream milongas for deaf people, securing access for a group conventionally excluded. We bid for and secured £10,000 of university research funding to run it. Our plan was over two consecutive Sundays in February 2014 to run three Queer Tango workshops and then a milonga. I asked for help in running these events from dancers I know from a decade of dancing in London. In order to realise the Queer Tango principle that one's gender need not, and ought not, necessarily determine one's role, mostly I asked dancers - a mix of men and women - who could dance both roles. These 'hearing facilitators' gave generously of their time.

At the workshops, each hearing facilitator wore a badge saying which roles they could dance. During the first workshop participants were asked to experience both roles and were encouraged from then on to say to the facilitators which role they would like to adopt. In this way, participants had a modest degree of agency. The workshops were fascinating. I certainly learnt a great deal, some of which may seem obvious to those more skilled in communicating with deaf people. Our participants had differing degrees of deafness, from one with profound deafness (and another hearing dog), to others who might describe themselves as 'hard of hearing', and pretty much everything in between. Lip reading was useful. My standing in the middle of a circle and explaining was not. Normally I demonstrate and speak, simultaneously explaining what I am showing with my body. It had not occurred to me that anyone obliged to watch my lips could not then also watch my

body. Once a participant had politely pointed this out, I was careful to separate speech from action and make them sequential.

Did it work? We have analysed the data - reflective commentaries and the results of semi-structured interviews - and this much is clear: our participants self-evidently enjoyed the experience. Coarsely, when we set up the workshops, I had envisaged pairings of a deaf dancer with a hearing one. But there are degrees of deafness as there are of blindness. The sight of two deaf dancers forming a couple was a welcome surprise to me. I am reminded anew: each of us brings different things to the dance, when we become a couple, because we are different people, with different abilities – arguably, always ‘differently abled’. Where both are deaf, the chances are each is hearing different aspects of the music and, in a manner parallel to hearing dancers hearing or responding to different things, each brings what they hear to the dance. As one of the facilitators remarked, teaching those who can’t hear the music to dance is not so very far removed from teaching those who don’t. A chapter of a book about its potential value to older people is in hand, as is an academic paper. D/deaf CAN Dance! is the subject of a short, professionally-produced film.

Yet another Coffee...

Summer 2014. I am at a conference co-presenting with Jack Badu, the 25-year-old Vice President for Education & Welfare of our university’s Students’ Union. Our paper has nothing to do with tango. Jack, who graduated with a degree in sports and psychology, was shortly to move on to a job as a football coach, possibly in Sweden. Sweden? “Jack?” I asked over coffee, “Do you think you could work Queer Tango into football coaching?” And of course, we laughed at the absurdity of the idea! And then we stopped laughing and thought, why not? And we have.

How much does football have in common with tango? Quite a lot. Historically, haven’t men in Argentina and Uruguay made links between football and tango? They have – and there has been a long, somewhat disputed history of men dancing with each other. And isn’t professional football riddled with homophobia? In the UK, it most certainly is. Most UK football supporters, Jack included, know about Justin Fashanu, the British, gay footballer who was forced to come out and then committed suicide in the 1990s. Today, of the 5000 or so professional footballers in the UK, not one has ‘come out’ as gay. Jack plays football and is not gay. I dance tango, and I am. Jack did not then dance tango, but he is learning and has come to classes at Queer Tango London. I last kicked a football in 1968, but have since been to and enjoyed a football match. Together, we have devised *The Football Tango Project* (originally, *The Football Queer Tango Project* but a fully supportive football source said no professional club would be associated with a project with the word ‘queer’ in its title. We chose to engage rather than argue over language, where the language was an obstacle). We secured research funding for pilot workshops with student football players to get us to the point where we can credibly offer Football Tango Workshops to professional football clubs. These pilot workshops have been fascinating, as the player participants experience in a physical way the near absolute embargo on men embracing one another in any context other than – say – the wild excitement of a goal scored, or grief. What is that embargo about? And what happens if, calmly, a ‘straight’ man embraces a gay one?

We have made links with Stonewall, the UK LGBT campaigning organisation, who now support us, and with football organisations, such as the UK Football Association (FA). Jack now volunteers as player, coach and TV sports pundit on Sky 519 for Football Beyond Borders, a charity which uses football to help troubled young people. Publicly, professional

football opposes homophobia. The FA sponsors anti-homophobia champions and supports the 'Rainbow Laces' campaign run by Stonewall, where players wear Rainbow Laces to show their opposition to homophobia. But how else, practically, are football clubs to combat it? Those who take up our offer of Football Tango Workshops stand not only to enable their players to explore physical, social improvisation in a way that is novel, memorable and of potential value to them on the football pitch, both players and clubs can also be seen to be *doing something* about homophobia. The workshops should be used to generate good, arresting news stories (with good, arresting photographs of their players dancing with each other) which will help develop the clubs' brand values and ultimately, help the image of the game. For an industry that, for sound commercial reasons, is increasingly embracing a more modern attitudes towards race and sexism closer to the values of the people it is trying to attract, tackling homophobia is the obvious next step.

The Football Tango Project is the subject of a short film made by the tango dancing, football fan and film-maker, Alan Stepney.

Are there qualities inherent in Queer Tango of value beyond the dance-floor?

Taken together, what do these three projects indicate about the possible uses of Queer Tango? As I argue elsewhere, Queer Tango's debt to the mainstream is considerable. Many of the qualities of dancing exploited here are common to both. So what particular qualities does 'Queer' add? I argue there are at least three: firstly, an invaluable 'gender blindness' towards the individual. Gender is not ignored in Queer Tango. Women and men dance differently. However, unlike in the mainstream, gender is not used to determine what anyone, man or woman, might normally be allowed to do, or want to do, or expect to do, or be expected to do. That which is realised and valued on the Queer Tango dance-floor provides powerful, embodied models of less prescriptive attitudes which are also desirable in life. Secondly, as with the individual, so with relationships: Queer Tango ensures that decisions about how men and women interact with each other in whichever combinations are similarly not seen as predetermined, or 'natural', or casual. On and off the dance-floor, both are shown to be deliberate choices made within recognisable, social, political and cultural contexts. Such an awareness prompts debate; the choices can be constructive; attitudes may change. By extension, this last project, should it work, suggests a third quality closely aligned to the original spirit of Queer Tango: it may well provide a unique, safe, even playful framework within which those who are afraid of and potentially hostile to 'the other' may overcome those fears by literally embracing others irrespective of their gender or of their sexual orientation or of conventional, social taboos.

To the incredible richness of the Argentinian tango, Queer Tango brings a fresh perspective and adds distinctively 'Queer' qualities of its own. If tango is 'walking with attitude', then some of the attitudes embodied in Queer Tango may, indeed, prove useful beyond the immediate confines of the dance floor in a whole variety of ways, not least, as a tool to push back the boundaries of homophobia.

Notes

'Shall I lead now? Learner experiences of leader-follower relationships through engagement with the dance' by Julie Burge, Ray Batchelor and Lionel Cox; an exploration of the value of Queer Tango in reflecting on leadership' in *The Embodiment of Leadership*, published by Jossey-Bass, (April 2013) ISBN 978-1118551615

D/deaf CAN Dance! A cross-disciplinary research project site:

http://bucks.ac.uk/research/research_news_events/d-deaf/

D/deaf CAN Dance! - the video: <http://youtu.be/all1PowKc9c>

The Football Tango Project: <http://footballandhomophobia.tumblr.com>

A Women's Tango Retreat - Breitenbush Hot Springs, Oregon, USA

© Laurie Ann Greenberg

The Women's Tango Retreat was first conceptualized in the early stages of a growing tango community in Portland, Oregon. I began my tango studies at Clay's Dance studio in 1997 when our dance community in Portland was barely 30 strong. Not long after my first tango lesson a visiting teacher named Daniel Trenner and a young Argentine, Florencia Tacchetti, came to Portland to do a series of workshops. It was then that I discovered that learning to lead and follow was an integral part of learning tango. Daniel and Florencia both stressed strongly that learning to lead and follow would improve your dance and make you a better dancer more quickly than dancing one role. During those early years of tango, I formed a small group of women who were also developing their roles as both leaders and followers. I was inspired by the depth of our friendship and rapid development of our dancing. As our tango improved on and off the social dance floor, we began gaining a band of 'followers' that wanted to learn to lead as well. We were having so much fun dancing together we seemed to be inspiring other women that wanted to dance both roles, so I created several women-only 'learn to lead' events. I liked the idea of 'women only' because I enjoy the process of women working together. I feel there is a very different learning style between men and women. Women seem to work together in a more compassionate and constructive way when there are no men around.

As my women's events gained popularity I hoped to one day create an event that would bring together other leading women from around the country to explore, dance and deepen their practice.

In 1998 I met Sharna Fabiano, who at that time was working, touring and dancing with Daniel Trenner. She also had delved deeply into tango and its roles and culture. We quickly became friends. Over the course of many years we collaborated both on the East coast and West coast creating women-only events. I shared with her my desire to create this larger yet intimate retreat where women could deepen their tango practice. After years of talking about the possibilities of an event, we decided to make it a reality. The first Women's Tango Retreat happened in the Fall of 2011 at Breitenbush Hot Springs, a retreat center in the majestic area of Mt. Jefferson in Breitenbush, Oregon. We decided in creating this retreat that we would limit the event to the more advanced dancer. In doing so we would already have a tango language with which to teach and more years of study to discuss at a deeper level. Our hope and vision was to inspire those who attended to go back to their own tango communities and inspire others to learn both roles.

Women's Retreat 2011 Report

The first annual Women's Tango Retreat at Breitenbush Hot Springs was beautiful and intimate far beyond our expectations, and we are deeply grateful for the participation of all who attended. In early December, we welcomed women from Tampa, Denver, Philadelphia, Minneapolis, San Francisco, Portland, St Louis, Phoenix, and Los Angeles for a national gathering spanning three generations of women. In addition to many hours of dancing tango and blissfully stretching in partner yoga, we also shared thoughts on age, community building, and the atmosphere of milongas in the United States.

First, Lori Coyle facilitated a series of exercises that increased our appreciation for tango's potential to help new dancers feel safe in their own bodies. As experienced dancers, mobility is something we often take for granted, but for those who have never had a regular movement practice, long-term tensions and insecurities held in the body can interfere with both physical and emotional health. As influential members of our

communities, we are in the position to create safe spaces for others to discover increased physical and emotional comfort, releasing these long-term tensions.

Second, led by Megan Pingree, we reflected on the three concepts of 'age' that we each live with: our chronological ages, the ages of our respective tango communities, and our 'tango' ages, or the number of years we have been dancing. I found the interplay of these three ages a useful way to understand my relationships with others within tango communities everywhere, and to observe how and why the roles I play change over time. To get a sense of our conversation, imagine what was happening in your life when you began dancing, and what the history of your tango community was at that time. Now reflect on what is happening in your life now, and how long you have been dancing. Has your tango life influenced your chronological life? The other way around?

Finally, the deconstruction of lead and follow gender roles was discussed as a way in which tango dance might be represented more as an artistic activity and less as a metaphor for heterosexual desire. All agreed that the desire metaphor of tango is perfectly fine, but that certain problematic patterns arise when tango is exclusively accessible through this metaphor. For example, when heterosexual desire is the dominant way of relating, youth (primarily in women) and status (primarily in men) are favored, and the environment is competitive. When this desire is one of many choices, skill and openness are favored, and the environment is more collaborative. To get a sense of our conversation, imagine how you feel in a milonga when your dancing is a reflection of your profile as a potential mate. Now imagine how you feel at a milonga when your dancing is a reflection of who you are as a person. What influences your choices of what to wear, who to dance with, how to dance, and who to talk to in each situation?

The Next Women's Tango Retreat

Since the success of the first retreat many of the women who attended were so moved by their experience, they started their own women's tango gatherings in their home towns! The retreat continues this year at Breitenbush Hot Springs, November 20th through November 24th, 2014.

Note

Sharna Fabiano, *Women's Retreat 2011 Report*, first published on January 2, 2012 at the website of Women's Tango Retreat -

<http://womenstangoretreat.wordpress.com/2012/01/02/womens-retreat-2011/>

Laurie Ann Greenberg: artworks and artist statement
© Laurie Ann Greenberg



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Artist Statement

© Laurie Ann Greenberg

Laurie Ann Greenberg: These two pieces were inspired by my love of tango, the power of friendship and my new-found fascination with paper. They were also inspired by a piece of vintage sheet music by A.G. Villoldo, a Lyricist, composer of tango, that was gifted to me by a friend and fellow tango dancer.

I created the same image twice. The first time I cut the image was with a single sheet of black silhouette paper and an #11 x-acto knife. The faces of the women on the original cover were pensive, somber and somewhat sad and distant. The faces on this "single cut" most resemble that original piece. In its finished state the paper cut was fixed over plexiglass with a mat behind the image to give it depth and movement, then matted and framed.

The second time I cut the image I used colored paper and created a 3-dimensional feel by using several layers of paper, foam core and small adhesive spacers. The use of color in the image gives it a completely different feel. I also changed the expression on the faces which gave the piece a more playful look.

Finally, I love the art of silhouette cutting and the challenge of keeping all lines seamlessly connected just as I love how a single tango can move seamlessly on the dance floor. The color style of cutting is my own creation I developed over hours of cutting, blood, sweat and a few tears. The development of my paper cutting much resembles the development of my learning to dance tango... many hours, sweat and definitely a few tears, but the outcome is as beautiful as tango itself.

New Works

I continue to develop my style of paper cutting with these 2 additional paper cut pieces. I am always looking at images that inspire me to cut in a 3-dimensional way.

The Band Plays On piece is inspired from a graphic image I saw that was originally in black and white and with a man and woman dancing. I thought a color paper cut would be fun to re-create in a 3-dimensional form and change the dancers to two women. At first glance, one might not see that there are 2 women dancing but a second study of the dancers brings into view the subtle change from man to woman.

The second paper cut piece *Tango Confused* was inspired by a photograph I came across of a small dance company from San Francisco called Tango Con*fusion performing in Buenos Aires. I love the image, history and complexity of the corset. The attention to detail, structure and concentration it took to cut the back of the corset compares to the study of tango with much concentration.

As in the many layers of tango my work has layer upon layer of paper that give it form, movement, texture and depth. These two pieces were hand cut with #11 x-acto blade, matted and framed by me. Each piece is 18" x 24" and constructed with matte then foam core to give it the depth and the paper cut piece is finally fixed to archival matte board and fitted into a frame.



The Band Plays On. © Laurie Ann Greenberg



Tango Confused. © Laurie Ann Greenberg

Los Laureles: Queer Tango for Everyone in the Barrio de Barracas

© Ray Batchelor and Olaya Aramo

Can dancing Queer Tango improve the lives of people beyond the immediate LGBT community? The remarkable work of Edgardo Fernández Sesma, Doris Brennan and others at Los Laureles, the famous Buenos Aires community café, restaurant, music and tango venue, in the heart of the Barrio de Barracas, suggests that that it can.

Barrio de Barracas and Los Laureles: history and context

The name Barracas, despite its resemblance to the English word 'barracks' (sleeping quarters for soldiers), actually refers to the rudimentary shanty buildings thrown up towards the end of the 18th century on the banks of the Riachuelo River to accommodate slaves, the leather tanners or abattoirs. In the 19th century, the area became a suburb for the wealthy until, in 1871, along with many other *barrios* in the south of Buenos Aires, yellow fever swept through it. The rich fled north, never to return, leaving a largely working class population who worked in the factories of Barracas or pursued trades such as tailoring or organ grinder. To support this thriving community, the area was dotted with perhaps a dozen *pulperías*. A *pulpería* is part general store selling cloth, food, medicines, clothing and so on, and part café, bar and restaurant, also serving as a social hub, with opportunities to make music, to sing and to dance. In 1893, as part of the completion of the development of a corner plot, Los Laureles opened its doors. Over the years, it became associated with many legendary tango figures including the singer, José Lomio, better known as Ángel Vargas, who was born in the area and was a regular at Los Laureles; so, too, Enrico Cadícamo, the tango lyricist. Los Laureles became a part of tango history.

However, by the 1980s the area had begun to decline. Some of the factories were closing down and a motorway cut through it destroying a number of houses and two local parks. One by one, the *pulperías* vanished. By the early 21st century, Los Laureles itself was in danger of demolition with plans to replace it with a more commercially viable, modern apartment block. But, following representations, the decision was taken in 2008 to declare it a historical heritage place and it was re-invented as a centre dedicated to celebrating the tango history and culture of the local community and to bringing new life to the area under the leadership of Doris Brennan.

Doris waited to see what people brought to or asked of Los Laureles. The restaurant function from earlier days was revived. Similarly, once again it became a place where people could bring a guitar or a bandoneon and play, or turn up and sing, or hold meetings. Now, in 2014, Los Laureles is the only surviving *pulpería* in the Barracas – and it is thriving.

Edgardo Fernández Sesma brings Queer Tango to Los Laureles

When Doris approached Queer Tango teacher Edgardo Fernández Sesma in February 2014 to start running classes, she had a particular approach in mind. Los Laureles exists to support the people living in the area. She wanted to create a dance space at Los Laureles which would be socially much more open and inclusive than the existing Queer Tango spaces in Buenos Aires, a place where locals would be welcomed and at ease. Edgardo is a queer milonguero with many years of experience of the Buenos Aires tango environment. He was already running *Clases de Tango entre Muchachxs*[1] ('Tango Classes for Muchachxs') in the gay area of Buenos Aires in San Telmo. Since 2012, Edgardo now also runs *Clases de Tango Diversas* ('Diverse Tango Classes') on Sundays for the Sociedad de Integración de Gay Lésbica (Society for the Integration of Gays and

Lesbians or SIGLA) at Los Laureles. Doris Brennan explains that for her Los Laureles,

it is (...) not Queer Tango milongas specifically, but Queer Tango naturally coexisting, like it should be, with traditional tango and all kinds of tango we can imagine; everyday, without labels, because my job it's about growing tango life in freedom and spontaneity. I am proud that Los Laureles has developed into a space of social integration, queer, unstructured, rebellious, traditionalist, generational interchange, welcoming new musicians and controversial avant-garde composers. It is a mix of all this, like life itself in its best expressions. It is a pleasure for me to work towards this and I'm sincere about it.

Under the slogan, 'The tango is not just a dance', Edgardo and Doris assert that:

... the tango is not just a dance, but a cultural phenomenon which can be used to help improve the environment in the sense of fostering greater 'integration' and 'activism', where dancing can transcend the damage caused by sexism and homophobia, creating instead the freedom to love and to dance tango.

Los Laureles does not charge for dancing, but offers instead recreational tango for free (although the hat is often passed around) encouraging friendly, social interaction with the aim of generating common political ground against homophobia and sexism.

But, what type of tango? By broadly adhering to both the milonguero style of dancing tango and the traditional codes of behaviour in these historic spaces, the milonguero style tango salon of the 1920s and 1930s is revitalised. Edgardo teaches milonguero style whenever possible, but there are limits. For Edgardo,

...it is not so much the style of the dance which is important, but more the objectives of socialisation and integration. In this Queer Tango space, the *cabeceo* is rare. People are more inclined simply to ask.

Edgardo believes both are appropriate ways to invite someone to dance provided they are not constrained by the traditional macho tango code, so that anyone can ask anyone.

Mostly, the misunderstandings that arise in environments such as Los Laureles or SIGLA or Espacio Cultural Nuestros Hijos (ECuNH*i*) are the result of the mixing of different generations rather than prejudices about the gender make-up of couples as such. Although outside the class most heterosexuals may prefer to dance with someone else who is heterosexual, one of Edgardo's objectives is the integration of older people in the tango community at Los Laureles.

Edgardo remarks:

We have had some interesting situations. One Wednesday when we were nearly full, a table of six women who were pretty upset complained to us that this was '*una milonga de homosexuales*' because all the good dancing was happening between women or between men dancing with each other. Why did these men discriminate against them in this way? Smiling I said, "Why don't you ask to dance with us?" They said they had been taught to wait to be asked by a man. No one had suggested to them that they could ask a man to dance. I said to them, "No women here are dependent on men. Everyone is equal, equal to dance, equal to ask others to dance, equal to agree to

dance and equal not to agree to dance.” Then they began to think about what was stopping them from doing that.

Los Laureles has large windows overlooking the street. Local milongueros and milongueras, veterans from the traditional tango scene, as well as dancers and singers from barrios further afield all come to this Queer Tango venue. Some belong to the local tango ‘aristocracy’ although to them, the idea of *intercambio* (the swapping of roles) is completely unknown. With students between the ages of 70 to 95 years at these classes at Los Laureles, as well as at the *Taller de Tango Danza para adultos mayores* (‘Tango Dance Workshops for Seniors’) at the Escuela de Arte del Espacio Cultural Nuestros Hijos (ECuNHi)[2], Edgardo seeks to change paradigms related to tango, such that older people can be integrated into alternative, Queer Tango environments, and so oppose the sexism and homophobia which might otherwise be expected among dancers of this generation. For Edgardo, part of the importance of Queer Tango at Los Laureles is that ‘it is happening in a location emblematic of the area and that the issues which we address, we are able to address in the context of tango.’

A more recent development which attacks homophobia and fights for human rights in a much more direct way has been the Queer Tango ‘flashmobs’ which he has organised from Los Laureles. Queer Tango dancers are invited to turn up in public places, sometimes at night, and dance together. Each one has a placard strapped to their back with the name of a country such as Grenada, Afghanistan or Nigeria, where LGBT people are oppressed, murdered, outlawed, imprisoned or executed.

In one of his latest initiatives, Edgardo seeks to build tango bridges between the old and the very young, too. In August 2014, he wrote on Facebook:

I am planning with great enthusiasm a tango class in which approximately 50 tangueros and tangueras between the ages of 65 and 95 will help about 50 children between 7 and 8 years of age. The idea is that after the 3 hour class, the children should be able to dance a whole tango and have an unforgettable life experience, while the older people will have fed back to the children something of their wonderful desire to continue ‘learning,’ continue ‘sharing’ and keep ‘dancing’ - which is like saying ‘keep living’, isn't it?[3]

Are the milongas at Los Laureles 'queer'?

Doris Brennan had received an unusual gift. The father and grandfather of a good friend of hers had been music programmers for a national radio station in Buenos Aires. Once they had died, Doris’s friend had in his house – and offered to her – a very large, high quality, professional record player of the kind used in the 1950s, designed not to play vinyl records, but old 78rpm records made from shellac or *discos de pasta*. And that was not all. The record player came with between 4000 and 5000 tango *discos de pasta* from the same period. The team, Doris, Edgardo and the DJs at Los Laureles, are devoted to preserving a valuable cultural heritage, the *patrimonio* of the tango, of the Barracas and beyond. And to them playing the old records on the vintage equipment is a must.

Visit the Los Laureles website and you will see that there are milongas with *discos de pasta* on Wednesdays, on Thursdays and on Saturdays; and on Fridays, a *Peña de Tango*, open microphone sessions when people are encouraged to sing. What you will not see are the words ‘Queer Tango’.

Seen from a wider perspective Los Laureles is part of the alternative tango movement in Buenos Aires which seeks to further wider social and cultural goals. The work of Jean Paul

Antibero, whose free, open-air practica in a park near the Parque Patricios H metro station, the Práctica Patricios, has been running on Saturday afternoons since 2010, can also be seen as a part of this alternative tango movement. It describes itself as:

A place where musicians, young and old, belong and can be found throughout the year. It has a relaxed and comradely atmosphere where you can take time to enjoy dancing and drink mate. The Práctica Patricios is a self-managed, independent practica which is run with the support of local people and of friends of tango. It fulfils a vital social role by reconnecting the neighbourhood to the tango.[4]

The musicians who turn up each week – enough for an orchestra – are not paid, but ‘pass around the hat’. Práctica Patricios and Los Laureles are geographically close and as the Práctica Patricios winds down, people come on afterwards to Los Laureles to carry on dancing. And so too do the Queer Tango tanguero/as of Buenos Aires. But still, the question persists as Buenos Aires has famous and overtly Queer Tango venues such as La Marshall and Milonga de Tango Queer.

Los Laureles is popular with both queer and straight dancers. Edgardo Fernández Sesma, Doris Brennan and the other facilitators, indeed, demonstrate through their work that Queer Tango can and does have a value to those beyond the LGBT community, while at the same time benefiting that community by both indirectly and directly fighting homophobia. Any tendency towards creating an LGBT ghetto is countered by their throwing open the doors of Los Laureles and inviting the world to dance with them on their Queer Tango dance floor.

Notes

Youtube video of Queer Tango Flashmob:

UN TANGO CONTRA LA HOMOFOBIA III: "Pedimos Libertad para Amar y para Bailar Tango" (2014). <https://youtu.be/TADOhXul95M>

'Tango entre Muchachxs' or 'Tango entre Muchach@s' means 'tango between girls and tango between boys' where the '@' symbol, or an 'x', replaces both the feminine 'a' and the masculine 'o', in an innovative use of Spanish designed to circumvent the otherwise inescapable gendering of the language.

2 Espacio Cultural Nuestros Hijos (ECuNHí – 'Cultural Space: Our Children') which opened in 2008, is the cultural centre and art school at the Madres de Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires. It is on the site of the former Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada (ESMA) which, during the dictatorship (1976-1983), was the largest and most active of the clandestine detention centres.

3 The original quote in Spanish: "ESTOY MUY ENTUSIASMADO preparando una CLASE de TANGO que unos 50 tangueros y tangueras de entre 65 y 95 años, darán a unos 50 niños y niñas de entre 7 y 8 años. La idea es que después de 3 horas de clase, los niños puedan bailar un tango completo y hayan vivido una experiencia inolvidable y que los adultos mayores hayan retroalimentado esas maravillosas ganas de seguir "aprendiendo", seguir "compartiendo" y seguir "bailando", que es como decir "seguir viviendo", no?." - Edgardo Fernández Sesma, Facebook, August 29, 2014.

4 The original quote in Spanish: "Un lugar de pertenencia donde músicos, jóvenes y grandes se encuentran durante todo el año. En un ambiente distendido y de camaradería, donde se puede disfrutar el momento de bailar y tomar unos mates. La Práctica Patricios es una práctica autogestionada e independiente con el apoyo de los vecinos y amigos del tango. Cumpliendo así un rol social de vital importancia reconectando al barrio con el tango." - www.tintaroja-tango.com.ar.

Classes by Tango Libre at Los Laureles – Photograph

© Edgardo Fernández Sesma



*Classes by Tango Libre at the "Otra Milonga", Bar Los Laureles, Barracas, Buenos Aires.
© Edgardo Fernández Sesma, 2014.*

Biographies

Alex Gastel is a linguist who isn't doing a lot of linguistics anymore. Most of their time genderqueer Alex is dancing Tango, blogging, drinking tea and writing stuff for a living. They also like books, cats and discussions with crazy philosophers, sometimes until the sun comes up. Alex plans on travelling the world together with their dancing partner and soulmate, in search of adventures. They recently moved from Buenos Aires to Berlin and are enjoying life.

Alice Heigh is a photographer. After 11 years of doing ballroom dance she decided to take up something new, so she started taking photographs. Firstly, being interested in personality Alice mostly shot female portraits, though then she gradually got more involved in photographing live events: various performances, concerts, etc. This finally led her to become more interested in photographing dynamic events rather than static staged photography in the studio. In 2013 she worked for a news website and took pictures of some volunteer charity projects for orphanages. In the same year she started dancing Queer Tango and taking photographs at milongas. She brings the insights of being a dancer herself to her pictures, a feeling of being engaged, swirling in a dance. At the moment Alice finds the questions of gender and queer identity most fascinating and challenging in her work. Alice is currently based in St Petersburg, Russia.

Belén Castellanos, PhD, is a Spanish teacher and an author writing about philosophy and literature. She began her relationship with tango in 2000, when she was 22. Previously dancing flamenco, - a group or solo dance form fundamentally related to the stage - Belén changed flamenco for a dance floor and a couple dance with loads of personality which prompted very different experiences. Flamenco is almost exclusively danced by women; the female friendships were her emotional reasons for dancing. In tango Belén encountered the milonga codes which she at first thought were merely an aesthetic and an innocent part of a tradition, but after a while she realised that they were structured gender codes endangering the emotional experience of tango, the social construction of the encounters and milongas and even the dance itself. In addition, queer theory was a constitutive element of philosophical research for her. Dancing tango without questioning the uncomfortable identity which rigid gender roles could develop inside herself, other women and other dancers became impossible for her.

Birthe Havmoeller / www.queertangobook.org is the creator of the Queer Tango Book Project, co-editing *The Queer Tango Book* together with Ray Batchelor and Olaya Aramo. Birthe is an independent editor, visual artist and queer arts activist. Fine art photography has been her creative medium since 1989. In 2003 she launched 'Feminine Moments', an international resource site and blog about fine art made by lesbian, bisexual and queer feminist artist. Birthe identifies as a lesbian and a dual role tango dancer. She was a social dancer, dancing the old Danish couple dances and the Irish set dances before she started dancing tango in 2009. She has made home videos, documenting Queer Tango performances at gala milongas in Berlin, Copenhagen and in her home town Aarhus in Denmark. Birthe's videostream: www.youtube.com/user/BirthesTango

Carlos Blanco is a photographer and tango teacher. He is a graduate from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM-Mexico), and obtained a master's degree (2012) in Visual Arts from the Academia de San Carlos at the same university, where he began research into documentary photography as a process of communication and identity. This work, undertaken in Mexico City's Tango community, was completed at

the Instituto Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes at the Universidad de la República (the University of the Republic) in Montevideo, Uruguay. Carlos has participated in various art exhibitions in Mexico and Canada. He has danced since 1995. Initially a folk dancer, he started dancing Argentinian tango in 2008. Blanco is based in Mexico City, where he teaches both traditional tango and Queer Tango. He has taught mainstream and queer tango workshops in Mexico and overseas including Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Paris and Geneva. In particular he participated in the Festival Internacional De Tango Queer De México (2011, 2012, 2014), and taught Queer Tango workshops in the 3rd Queer Tango Marathon, Buenos Aires, 2012. Carlos' videostream: www.youtube.com/channel/UCVusJE25oakcx44dIXkINPg/videos

Carolina de Beus / www.tangovisions.be/tango-nachtboek was born in the Netherlands. After living in Italy, she is now in Antwerp, Belgium. Carolina discovered tango music working on Luciano Berio's opera *La Vera Storia*. Berio was influenced by Astor Piazzola. Maria Ilva Biolcati, aka 'Milva', who sang in the opera, gave Carolina a CD of her singing tango. Discovering its richness, she listened to Golden Age tango and in 2006 she began dancing: milongas most evenings, two classes a week, workshops and tango holidays, simultaneously studying for her bachelor's degree in Family Science. Carolina now works at a psychiatric hospital. She loves mentally and physically hard work combined with tango to release stress and empty her mind. Without tango she is certain that she would have experienced 'job burnout'.

Chelsea Eng / www.TangoChelsea.com is a co-founding member of, and oft-appointed writer for, dance company Tango Con*Fusión. A lifelong dancer and since 1994 a devotee of Argentine Tango, Chelsea is a full-time tango professional: performer, improviser, choreographer and teacher. She holds a Master's Degree in Education – Dance Specialization from Stanford University and is the founder of the Argentine Tango Program at City College of San Francisco. In 2012, Chelsea was thrilled to co-choreograph and perform with Buenos Aires-based dancer Romina D'Angelo's female duet in Tanghetto's 10th Anniversary Show, directed by Max Masri, at the Teatro ND in Buenos Aires. She received a return invitation from Tanghetto to choreograph and perform a piece at the Teatro ND in 2014. Chelsea's writing has been published in IN DANCE, San Francisco's long-running dance newsletter. Her voiceover work is featured in *Trading Places*, Tango Con*Fusión's DVD on lead-follow exchange. Chelsea is a recipient of a 2013 CASH Grant in Dance, a grants program of Theatre Bay Area, in partnership with Dancers' Group, for a new collaborative project to be presented in San Francisco in 2014. A staunch animal lover, Chelsea supports animal advocacy and rescue efforts.

Claudio Gonzalez is a professional dancer, performer and tango teacher based in Buenos Aires. Growing up he learned to dance tango and began also to practice various expressive forms: artistic theater, contemporary dance and circus arts, seeking to merge them with the basic element of tango. He was a student of the famous tango teacher Antonio Todaro. Claudio participated in the show *Tangokinesis* (1993) directed by Argentine choreographer Ana María Stekelman. This experience helped him to define the idea of what he wanted to create within tango: the fusion of contemporary dance and jazz with tango. Today Claudio is dancing all over the world as a performer of several dance companies or with his partner Melina Brufman (BA). Claudio has also performed together with Augusto Balizano (BA) at the International QueerTango-Festival in Berlin (2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014) and other Queer Tango events.

Con Artist / www.UnitedTango.com and United Tango Group at Facebook; born Constance Anna Elizabeth Cuttitta. Con was disowned by her father and divorced, when

she decided to give herself a name the way people chose their names throughout history - according to their profession. She is not a con, but an artist and a trained Argentine Tango dancer and classically trained ballet dancer, teacher, choreographer, who loves to perform. In 1979 she was the recipient of the Sita Grant to teach dance in Great Neck. In 2011 she had the honor to be invited by the tango legend Nelson Avila to perform at the elegant Vanderbilt Mansion in New York. Con has earned a BS Degree in Fine Art from Stonybrook University, NY. She is a painter and sculptor. In 1990 she was the recipient of the Utica Grant through Stonybrook University for creating 3D paintings. Her imagery is figurative. It includes the Goddess, gender, erotica, tango, sphenoid bones and humor, and has exhibited extensively nationally and internationally. She has worked with seniors and the handicapped her whole life, sharing performance and art. She was Recreation Director at Atria Assisted Living Group, and a costumer and puppet maker for Chazzam Entertainment. She worked as an art director for Decal Techniques. In between her creative endeavors, she worked as an executive secretary. She is presently hosting Spirit Tango, an Argentine tango class/practica/art weekly in Huntington NY. She has a daughter and two grandchildren.

Denise Lew / www.deniselew.com was born in Argentina. She discovered a passion for photography at the age of 13, when she began to experiment with analogue photography, making her own prints. In 2002 when she was 16, she and her family moved to Madrid. There her interest in photography deepened and she completed several courses. On finishing a two-year course in Mass Media in 2007, Denise moved to Barcelona, where she studied Photography and Digital Media at the Universitat de Barcelona, graduating in 2012. She is currently studying MA Photojournalism and Documentary Photography at the London College of Communication (LCC), part of the University of the Arts, London. Denise says, 'I am constantly looking to grow in both my personal and professional life by immersing myself in creative environments. I take advantage of every opportunity that presents itself to use my camera to show my perspective on life.'

Edgardo Fernández Sesma is a Buenos Aires Queer Tango dancer, teacher and above all, activist. Having run milongas since 2010, in 2012 he started 'Tango Diverso' at Sociedad de Integración Gay Lésbica Argentina (SIGLA) and 'Tango entre Muchachos' at Lugar Gay. He has taught at La Marshall and at Tango Queer and has since 2014, organised 'Taller de Tango-Danza, para adultos mayores' and 'Tango Libre', at Los Laureles community café and bar. His 'flashmobs' in Buenos Aires include: *Un tango contra la homofobia* in 2013 and 2014; and *Un tango contra el maltrato y abandono de las adultos mayores* twice in 2014. He works with school children, older people and blind people. He also coordinates the groups 'Visibilidad del Tango Queer' and 'Ciclistas por la diversidad' - Cyclists for Diversity who cycle to different destinations and then have a class. Edgardo has used Queer Tango to support gay marriage and gender identity law reform and counter oppression in Russia, Nigeria and Chile.

Gigi Gamble was born in Oakland, California, to Chilean and US parents. She is a playwright and performer who has written, produced and performed traditional and experimental genres including improvisation-based ensemble writing, short-form solos, plays and musicals. As a singer, she has performed and recorded with Bay Area jazz and tango musicians such as Odile Lavault, Maria Acuña, Trio Garufa, Tango No. 9, Marcelo Puig and Seth Asarnow, and John Schott. She was the featured vocalist at San

Francisco's 3rd and 4th International Queer Tango Festivals. The essay included in this publication is her first published work since 1999.

Giulia Cerulli is an Italian TV and Film writer, director and producer. Giulia holds a degree in the History of Cinema from the Sapienza college of the University of Rome. She has worked for more than ten years at Radio Televisione Italiana (RAI) on their leading, critically-acclaimed Sunday variety show. In 2003 she founded her production company Profile, where she produces and directs entertainment programmes and documentaries for many Italian and international broadcasting companies. Giulia has also directed documentaries for the United Nations in Africa and South America, and made several independent short films. Together with Mila Morandi she is currently working on the script of an EU-sponsored documentary on Argentinian Tango to be filmed in several European cities.

Helen 'La Vikinga' Halldórsdóttir was born in Iceland, but has lived abroad for 25 years in Sweden, Chile and since 2004 in Argentina. Helen has been teaching and has performed in Europe, Argentina and USA with Germán Gentile, Daniel Rodríguez, Martín Maldonado, Maurizio Ghella, Javier Guiraldi, Jorge Pahl, Alejandro Andrián, Walter Perez, Leonardo Sardella, Glenda Salas, Gunner Svendsen, Adrián Coria and other dancers. She dances both roles and is an excellent woman leader. Since 2009 she has been participating as a teacher and dancer in many Queer Tango festivals around the world: Buenos Aires, Hamburg, San Francisco, Mexico City, Copenhagen and New York. She has organised milongas: La Vikinga (one of the first alternative milongas in Argentina), Italia Unita, Rough, Bien Pulenta (the first gay-friendly and smoke-free milonga in Argentina) and Mano a mano (open-minded traditional milonga). Helen is also a shoe designer with her own label, La Vikinga / www.lavikingastore.com. At her tango school, Escuela La Vikinga, in Buenos Aires she teaches, alone or together with Javier Guiraldi and Daniel Rodriguez.

Hilda Hisas / www.hildahisas.com.ar is an Argentinian visual artist who lives in Buenos Aires. Her career as an artist has been always linked to tango. She began dancing tango in the mid-1990s and she attends the milongas of Buenos Aires regularly. She studied at the National Academy of Tango, investigating its origins, poetry and dance. She always says that tango is a sacred ritual that transports her in 3 minutes, into another world. In her opinion Queer Tango is a more comprehensive expression of this wonderful dance experience. As a visual artist, Hilda has been always interested in the human figure. She studied drawing and painting with live models and has exhibited regularly from 1969 to the present, while giving drawing classes at the Asociación Estímulo de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires. In 2004 she was invited to exhibit her drawings of tango in the Academia Porteña del Lunfardo, Buenos Aires. She has been painting tango dancers and former dance partners of the suburban tango just as she remembers, having observed them. She started dancing Queer Tango after an exhibition where some of the visitors had expressed their wishes that Hilda would paint Queer Tango couples too.

Juliet McMains is a dance scholar and artist whose work centers on social dance practices and their theatrical expression on competition and theatrical stages. Her first book, *Glamour Addiction: Inside the American Ballroom Dance Industry* (Wesleyan, 2006) won the 2008 Congress on Research in Dance Outstanding Publication Award. Juliet has also published articles on rumba, salsa, swing, and ballroom dance, all genres in which she has choreographed, performed, and danced socially for many years. Her latest book, *Spinning Mambo into Salsa: Caribbean Dance in Global Commerce* will be published by Oxford University Press in 2014 (more information at palladium-mambo.com). Her current

research project focuses on women who dance tango with other women. Juliet has a Ph.D. in Dance History and Theory from the University of California at Riverside and a B.A. in Women's Studies from Harvard University. She is currently an Associate Professor in the Dance Program at the University of Washington in Seattle.

Kristín Bjarnadóttir is an Icelandic writer, poet, producer, journalist and former actress from the north coast of Iceland, now living in Gothenburg, Sweden. She graduated as an actress from Odense Teater Skuespillerskole, and worked in theatre for two decades, in Denmark, Iceland and Sweden. Tango came into her life in 1996 and her texts about dance have been published in the Icelandic literary magazine *Tímarit Máls og Menningar* and in the Swedish magazine *Danstidningen*. In her poetry she seeks the simplicity and the rhythmic sound of spoken word. Her book of narrative poems about the Argentinean tango, *Ég halla mér að þér og flýg* (I lean against you and fly), was published in Icelandic in 2007 and in Swedish in 2009. She gives readings in collaboration with different musicians, specialized in tango, among them the Argentine bandoneonist and composer Carlos Quilici and the guitarist and composer Jorge Alcaide. She has been a Queer Tango activist in Gothenburg since early 2012, organising practicas and giving lessons as well as being a tango DJ.

Laura Valentino / www.lauraval.com is a fine art photographer based in Reykjavik, Iceland. She is also an avid tango dancer and has photographed festivals and other tango events in Iceland, Europe and the US. Laura's background is in painting; she has a Master of Arts degree from Berkeley, California (1980) and has held solo exhibitions in the US and Iceland. She is drawn to sensuality in her work, exploring gender and the human form, and found tango to be a perfect opportunity for that. Laura attended her first Queer Tango festival in 2008 in Stockholm and was struck by what she saw as an emphasis on connection and sensuality between the dancers. She shares her tango snapshots at [facebook.com/lavatop](https://www.facebook.com/lavatop).

Laurie Ann Greenberg / <http://laurieanngreenberg.blogspot.com> has been dancing both leading and following roles socially since 1997. As a lifelong tango student Laurie Ann believes that having a working knowledge of both leading and following roles allows her to experience the dance as an entire unit. From 2003 to 2010 Laurie Ann created and hosted several women's events in Portland, USA, and collaborated with such influential teachers as Caroline Peattie from San Francisco, Sharna Fabiano from LA, and Jennifer Olsen from Seattle. After collaborating on several events with Sharna Fabiano over the course of many years on the East coast and West coast, the two decided to organize The Women's Tango Retreat, a gathering for tangueras exploring both following and leading. The Women's Tango Retreat has happened each Fall from 2011 through 2014 at Breitenbush Hot Springs, Oregon, USA. Laurie Ann is currently based in Portland, Oregon, where she works as a stylist and visual artist. Her paper art is available online at her e-shop LaBoutiques, www.etsy.com/shop/LaBoutiques and at society6.com/aboutiques.

Marc Vanzwoll (formerly known as Marc SFQueerTanguero) is recognized as a tango resource. One of his focus areas is integrating queer and mainstream tango communities. He is passionate about Argentine Tango, and encourages everyone to participate. Marc currently teaches women leader tango workshops, all levels group classes, and organizes Letras de Tango, a shared community event focusing on understanding tango lyrics. In 2011 he served as a panelist addressing *The Relationship between Queer Being and Queer Consciousness. Happy Theory vs. Resistive Practice?* at the International Queer Tango Festival, Hamburg, Germany. In 2012 Marc moderated the panel discussion 'Queer Tango Activism – Beyond Theory' at the Stockholm International Queer Tango Festival.

Presently Marc lives with his husband in Boston and enjoys its progressive and inclusive tango community.

Mariana Docampo / www.tangoqueer.com is an Argentinean Queer Tango teacher, co-organiser of the International Queer Tango Festival of Buenos Aires and the founder of the weekly Tango Queer Milonga of Buenos Aires. She has been running practicas and milongas since 2005: Milonga de Mujeres, El Desvío and Prácticas Tango Queer. She has a BA from the University of Buenos Aires, specialising in gender studies. She teaches literature and has written four novels: *Al borde del Tapiz*, *El Molino*, *La fe* and *Tratado del Movimiento* as well as other writings included in various anthologies. She has participated as a teacher in the International Queer Tango Festival in Hamburg, 2006, the International Queer Tango Festival in Copenhagen, 2009, The Queer Tango Days in Copenhagen 2014, and the International QueerTango-Festival in Berlin 2011, 2013 and 2014. She has also given tango workshops in Stockholm, Zurich, Marseilles, Nice, Le Hague, Preston, Brighton and London.

Miguel Kanai teaches geography and urban studies at the University of Miami. He holds a PhD in Urban and Regional Planning from the University of California, Los Angeles. He has published widely in issues of globalization and urban change particularly focusing on entrepreneurial regimes of urban governance, cultural policy and politics, and the political implications of inequalities in cities. He participated in the 10th Architecture Exhibition at La Biennale de Venezia (2006) and multiple other international initiatives on urban development and city-making. Born and raised in Buenos Aires, he has lived, worked and studied in Japan, Germany and the United Kingdom previously to settling in the United States. His most recent projects question the implications of ecological entrepreneurialism for the Brazilian Amazon and the rise of urban homo-entrepreneurialism throughout the Americas. A passionate leader, follower, movie-goer and world traveller, he currently lives in downtown Miami with Sandy, his four-legged companion who actually hates everything tango.

Mila Morandi teaches Social Theatre at the Sapienza College of the University of Rome. She holds a Master's degree in NLP and Art Therapy and is trained in contemporary dance, contact improvisation and dance theatre, especially using Argentinian tango and contact tango as her creative language. Mila is also a choreographer, and regularly runs 'body language laboratories' for performers, art therapists and students. Mila is currently the coordinator of the Linguaggi del Corpo-Altrogenere (Alternative Body Languages), and the coordinator of Centre of Social Theatre and Research on Gender and Female Issues at Casa internazionale delle Donne (the International Women's House) in Rome. Mila has initiated and coordinated dance theatre and tango theatre events, collaborating with Auditorium Parco della Musica, the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia and the MAXXI – National Museum of the 21st Century Arts in Rome. She has studied tango with Argentinian and European tango professionals for more than 15 years, and together with Giulia Cerulli Mila is now working on the script for an EU-sponsored documentary on Argentinian Tango to be filmed in several European cities.

Natalia Merkulova has worked professionally in arts and culture, and participated in numerous arts activities. Between 2007 and 2013, she organised several poetry events along with her friend Angelina Saule. Together they ran projects combining poetry, visual arts, music, fashion, dance and theatre. They both participate in and are running a translating group 'Transviolating Poetry', which involved translating various poems and essays from English into Russian and vice versa. Natalia is also keen on drawing and created illustrations for a book of poems by Angelina Saule and a book entitled *Twisted*

Tongues. In 2012 she started dancing Queer Tango - both roles. Since 2013 she has been a DJ at queer milongas and parties. Being interested in the problems of gender, queerness and social roles she immediately appreciated the opportunities of Queer Tango both for feminists and for the mainstream dancing community. In 2013 she prepared research on gender norms in the tango community and the perspectives of the Queer Tango for the Conference *On the Crossroads: Methodology, theory and practice of LGBT and Queer Studies* in St Petersburg. Natalia is currently based in St Petersburg, Russia.

Olaya Aramo / <http://tangoqueermadrid.wix.com/tangoqueermadrid> is a queer tango dancer, teacher and organizer based in Madrid. She runs La Traviesa, an alternative queer milonga and she has organized Queer Tango workshops in several Spanish cities such as Valencia, Oviedo and Bilbao. She has also co-organised Queer Tango workshops together with LGBT associations in Madrid. She has written several articles on Queer Tango and she is co-creator of the *Sonidos exóticos para tres guerras*, a concert and book project about the links between music, gender and class in the Hispanic music forms of the 1930s. Olaya is also co-editor of *The Queer Tango Book* together with Birthe Havmoeller and Ray Batchelor. She understands tango from a feminist and queer perspective, aiming to disassociate tango roles from gender identity, as well as creating LGTBQI friendly tango spaces. From a technical point of view Olaya wants to develop a Queer Tango concept with a milonguero tango sensibility, subverting the milonga codes but maintaining a loving close embrace and the music from the Golden Age of Tango, intending to create a pedagogy which rejects the gendered elements of the traditional milonguero tango pedagogy. In the future she hopes to continue researching the queer origins of tango.

Paul Fairweather. Since the early 1970s, Paul has been involved with a wide range of activities in the LGBT community and in campaigning organisations. For many years, he worked as a councillor in local government, representing his local community on Manchester City Council. He has recently completed a project to establish the LGBT histories of Burnley, in East Lancashire in the UK. He currently works as a consultant/trainer on equality and diversity issues, in particular working with organisations who are developing their services for LGBT people. As well as having a passion for dancing tango he sings and plays clarinet and piano.

Ray Batchelor / www.queertangolondon.com. When he is not lecturing in the history and theory of art and design at Buckinghamshire New University near London, Ray dances, teaches, researches, lectures and writes about Queer Tango. Part of Tim Flynn's Queer Tango London since 2011, his research projects have included (with Julie Burge and Lionel Cox) Queer Tango workshops for managers learning how - in the fullest sense - to both lead and follow; (with Melanie Parris) Queer Tango workshops for D/deaf people in 'D/deaf CAN Dance!'; and now, jointly with sports coach Jack Badu, Queer Tango workshops for footballers in 'The Football Queer Tango Project', in which, having danced with one another, players reflect on how best to counter homophobia. He has with Birthe Havmoeller and Olaya Aramo co-edited *The Queer Tango Book* and contributed two essays to it. He lives in London with his husband, Jerome.

Sasha Cagen / www.sashacagen.com is a writer and life coach who dances tango. She is author of *Quirkyalone: A Manifesto for Uncompromising Romantics* and *To-Do List: From Buying Milk to Finding a Soulmate, What Our Lists Reveal About Us*. Sasha is currently writing *Wet*, a memoir about how she changed her life by following intuitions about the desires of her body. As a thinker, community builder and life coach, Sasha has given new meaning to the word quirky, spreading a message of self-acceptance and confidence for singled and partnered people who want to live a full-tilt life on their own terms. Sasha also

designs travel experiences for women to explore sensuality and connection in the Quirky Tango Adventure in Buenos Aires.

Sofia Silva / www.sofiasilva.com, an Argentine photographer who loves her subjects and her visual messages; in her creative practice she addresses a recurring theme related to consumption and its effects on the individual and society. Working to capture people, places, things, ideas in a distinctive way, she creates depth with a unique force that generates a connection between the subject and the viewer. Currently based in Madrid, Silva has exhibited extensively, both solo and group shows in USA and Argentina. Some of her most important exhibitions are: *Spreading Out* at Ricco Maresca Gallery (New York), *Corridor* at the Art Museum of the Americas (Washington DC), *Anthropic Deserts* at VVV Gallery (Buenos Aires), *Meditations on the Landscape of Desire* at C. Grimaldis Gallery (Baltimore), *Looking Now: BMA Digital Photography Project* at the Baltimore Museum of Art (Baltimore) and *Noches Encadiladas* at Arte x Arte (Buenos Aires). Silva's work has been acclaimed and highlighted by the press, such as the Washington Post, Baltimore Sun, Baltimore City Paper or Magazine, among others.

Susana Romero is an Argentinian artist, illustrator, and teacher, specialising in representing the moving, dancing figure. In Milan, between 1980 and 1997, Susana began her work with live models, developing approaches to illustration and painting and working in advertising and as an editor. In 1990, in Benin in Africa and again, in 1991 and 1993 in Havana, Cuba, she danced the folk dances she was drawing. Since 1997, she has concentrated on tango dancers in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She has exhibited widely, her solo shows including La Marsháll, Buenos Aires in 2006 and the Festival Internacional de Tango Queer, Buenos Aires, 2009. She has illustrated tango books and designed postcards and prints. Her work, *Mama Negra* won an award from UNICEF. Susana is based in Buenos Aires.